

# The A Level Content Advisory Board

The Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3BT

18<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing as Chair of the A Level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) to convey ALCAB's final advice, following consultation, on the content of the A levels and AS levels in the subjects (classical and modern languages, mathematics, further mathematics and geography) on which we submitted reports earlier in the summer.

DfE's consultation on draft content, based on our reports, ended in mid-September. ALCAB reconvened its subject panels to consider responses to the consultation, and they have done so very thoroughly and with an open mind. With the exception of classical languages, where no more than fine tuning was required, the panels have recommended substantive changes to each of the subjects in the light of comments received. We believe that the quality of the qualifications has been improved by this process and we commend the revised versions to all who will work with them in the years to come.

ALCAB has listened closely to feedback since our reports were published in July. We are grateful to all who commented, whether in formal responses to the consultation or in conferences and other events where ALCAB representatives were able to engage with delegates from schools and colleges. We were particularly keen to listen to the views of those who would be involved in the practicalities of teaching and examining the new qualifications. .

ALCAB's advice on each subject reviewed is summarised in annexes to this letter. In all cases we advise that, subject to changes agreed with DfE and Ofqual, the content of the new qualifications is suitable. However, in the case of mathematics and further mathematics, we are recommending that first teaching of the new AS/A levels should be no earlier than 2017, a year later than originally planned. This will ensure that the first cohort of students entering for the new AS/A levels will have progressed from the new GCSE, which is substantially different from the current GCSE. The reasoning for this recommendation, which we have discussed with Ministers and with Ofqual, is set out in the annex to this letter on mathematics and further mathematics.



Some of the responses to consultation suggested that the qualification content proposed by ALCAB's panels had been designed only for students who would progress to study for a degree in the subject concerned at a Russell Group university. I wish to reiterate that that was not the case. The panels also considered the needs of those who might study other subjects (related or contrasting) at a wide range of higher education institutions, or move directly to employment.

Some teachers and awarding organisations expressed the view that in the proposals there was too much content to teach and learn in the time available, particularly at AS level. The ALCAB panels have accepted this feedback and have agreed to omit some of the content originally proposed, and to move some from AS to A level. Details are in the annexes to this letter.

ALCAB's work was undertaken in the context of the Government's decision that the AS qualification would be "decoupled" from the A level. We were asked to recommend content for AS level that would be "co-teachable" with the first year of study for the A level, and we have done so. We continue to hope that AS qualifications in all the subjects which ALCAB has reviewed will be available to students who would benefit from studying for them. However, schools and colleges have raised questions about the practicalities of co-teaching, particularly as the co-taught content will be assessed at different levels at AS and A level. ALCAB can do no more than report these concerns and repeat that the AS qualification is valuable and valued by universities.

While we believe that the content of the revised qualifications will be rewarding to teach and to study, the responses to consultation confirmed that some of the new content will be unfamiliar to teachers and require changes from the curriculum currently offered. This means that concentrated work on teacher development, and the preparation of high quality resources, will be required to equip teachers to teach the new subjects in the timetable envisaged. The extent of this challenge cannot be underestimated: in mathematics, for example, there is to be 100% prescribed content including both statistics and mechanics. This compares with the wide range of options available at present. On 2014 figures, the new content would require a change in the material taught to 58% of students.

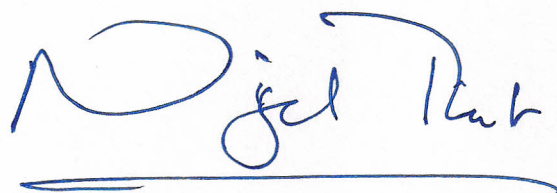
ALCAB is grateful to Ofqual for engaging our panels in discussions about the assessment arrangements for the new qualifications. These are, of course, a matter for Ofqual, but ALCAB is aware that there is always a risk that the overall intention and philosophy of a new qualification can be diluted when it is broken down into specific assessment objectives. Only when sample assessment material is developed will it be possible to tell whether it reflects what ALCAB was trying to achieve. We hope that subject experts from universities can continue to be engaged as this development work is done.

Once more, I have reason to acknowledge the quality and volume of the work done by the ALCAB panel members, and particularly by their chairs: Professor Stephen Parker, Henry Simon Professor of German, University of Manchester; Professor Richard Craster, Professor of Applied Mathematics, Imperial College London; and Professor Martin Evans, Professor of Geomorphology, University of Manchester.



Thank you for the opportunity for ALCAB to carry out this work. The experience of engaging universities in the design and development of new A levels has been a very positive one. I hope that it has sent a strong message to all involved in these qualifications that universities want to help and are important partners. We believe that the new qualifications on which we have advised will be rich and rewarding to study and better preparation for all universities.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nigel Thrift". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke underneath the name.

**Professor Nigel Thrift**  
**Chair, ALCAB**

## **Annexes**

	<u>Page</u>
Ancient and classical languages ....	4
Modern languages....	5
Mathematics and further mathematics....	7
Geography ....	10

## **Ancient and Classical Languages**

ALCAB confined its advice to classical languages (Ancient Greek and Latin), which are recognised as “facilitating subjects” by the Russell Group of universities. The panel did not engage appropriate experts to advise on any particular issues which might arise if the framework were used for other ancient languages which are currently offered at A level or AS level, or might be offered in the future.

ALCAB remains of the view that classical languages A levels as presently taught are essentially fit for purpose and that there is not a need for radical change. The recommendations in the ALCAB report built on that premise and the responses received were largely on points of detail or contextual matters. ALCAB has recommended some fine tuning of the content of the new qualification, in response to comments received. The main points considered included:

- The new qualification should encourage students’ reading to go beyond the prescribed texts. This could include, for example, reading in translation other parts of the work from which a set text is taken.
- The new qualification should provide a framework to encourage students to show originality, creativity and ambition.
- Translation from the language of study to English should remain at both A and AS level. It also forms part of the new GCSE and is important for progression to higher education.
- ALCAB sees AS and A level qualifications in classical languages as complementary to, rather than duplicating, qualifications in classical civilisation or ancient history, which are important and challenging in different ways. Cultural awareness is an integral part of the study of classical languages, and that fact should be reflected in the new A levels and AS levels as it is in the current qualifications.

## **Advice**

**Subject to detailed changes which have been agreed with DfE and Ofqual, ALCAB concludes that the revised content is suitable for the new A level and AS level qualifications.**



## Modern languages

The recommendations in ALCAB's report were based on an integrated approach to language learning, reflecting the importance and interdependence of practical language skills and development of high-level cognitive, analytical and intercultural skills. They positioned modern languages as a humanities subject with distinctive requirements in language acquisition alongside an analytical concern with the mediation of meaning between languages and cultures.

The ALCAB panel was acutely aware of the national trend of declining numbers studying languages at A level and above in recent years. They have sought to strengthen and revive the qualification, while avoiding unintended consequences that could discourage improved take-up.

ALCAB's approach was welcomed by respondents to the consultation from the subject communities and universities. However, some consultation responses raised questions and concerns about the content ALCAB had recommended. These included a concern by some teachers that the new content might not appeal to their students. A number of very helpful comments on technical assessment implications of the new content were submitted by the awarding organisations. The panel considered all the responses carefully and with an open mind. ALCAB was also represented at meetings and conferences during and after the consultation period, including events attended by large numbers of delegates from schools and colleges. The panel have recommended a number of changes, in response to comments received, and more detail of these is given below.

Some respondents suggested that the panel's recommendations were only suitable for students who would progress to study for a degree in a modern language at a Russell Group university. However, the panel also considered the needs of those who might combine a language with another subject (including STEM subjects) in a wide range of higher education institutions, or move directly to employment. Employer surveys stress the importance of intercultural understanding as well as linguistic skills<sup>1</sup>.

The panel is grateful for the detailed thought and work put into many of the responses received, including those by the awarding organisations.

Specific points arising from the responses to consultation include the following:

- Qualification size: A number of respondents expressed concern about the size of the qualifications at AS and A level. The panel therefore decided to reduce the number of themes to be studied at AS level from three to two and at A level from six to four. There are some consequential changes to the grouping of content under the reduced number of themes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gateway to growth*: CBI/Pearson education and skills survey 2014, page 49, exhibit 43



- One part of the proposed A level which attracted criticism was the requirement of an analytical essay in English. Concerns were raised about possible negative effects of this requirement on teaching and learning. Following further consideration, the panel decided to recommend removing the requirement for an essay in English. Instead, students at A level will be expected to know, understand and respond critically and analytically in the target language to two works studied in the language of study, one of which must be a literary work.
- Indicative lists of themes, works and research topics: The ALCAB panel's report included indicative lists for each of French, German and Spanish. These were carefully selected so as to register the variety of writing in the target language, to connect with important political, social, and cultural issues, to cover different historical periods, and to acknowledge the contribution of both men and women to the cultures of the target languages. A number of detailed questions were raised about the lists, particularly by awarding organisations and some teachers. While these lists do not form part of the regulatory requirement, it is important to make sure that the examples are appropriate and consistent. The panel has therefore agreed to discuss the lists further with subject experts from the awarding organisations and to publish revised lists.
- Range of options to be given to schools: there were concerns that the range of possible options in the ALCAB proposals was too wide and that this could create technical and practical problems. The panel considered that awarding organisations should be able to decide how much choice (if any) of themes and works they offer to schools. Other respondents thought that the list of categories of work which would be studied was too narrow: the panel decided to extend the range of literary works which may be studied to include biography in the life writing category, as well as autobiography, journals, diaries and letters.

#### Advice

**Subject to the comments in the covering letter from the Chair of ALCAB about the need for adequate preparation and training of teachers, and subject to the changes listed above (and other changes to points of detail), ALCAB concludes that the revised content is suitable for the new A level and AS level qualifications**



## **Mathematics and further mathematics**

The mathematics panel carefully considered all the comments received. Several were amendments to, or clarifications of, points of detail in the draft content. Those were very helpful and have been taken into account in the final version. Others sprang from misunderstandings of what was intended, and where necessary we have clarified the wording to avoid ambiguity.

Both in the consultation responses and in conferences and other events which ALCAB has attended, the main concerns raised have been about the context in which the new A and AS levels would be introduced, the scale of changes to be introduced across the system in a short period and the timing of the introduction of the new A levels. In particular, there were concerns about the decoupling of AS and A level. In the view of the panel the AS should continue to be available for use as a “stepping stone”, particularly for students who might not otherwise be confident enough to attempt A level mathematics.

ALCAB has concluded that it is essential for the timing of the introduction of the new A/AS mathematics and further mathematics to be aligned to the introduction of the new GCSE in mathematics, so that the first cohort of candidates can have progressed from the new GCSE. The new GCSE has significantly more content than previously and greater focus on algebraic fluency and the ability to construct clear mathematical arguments and proofs. It has been used as the starting-point for the design of the new A level. In the view of ALCAB, if the first cohort of candidates for the new A level were to progress from the current GCSE, the outcomes would be poor, which would not only be unfair to the students concerned and cause technical grading problems, but threaten take-up of the new A level for years to come. ALCAB therefore advises that the earliest first teaching date for the new A levels in mathematics and further mathematics should be 2017 – a year later than the date planned in the proposals issued for consultation.

The new A level has 100% prescribed content, including both statistics and mechanics, both of which will become compulsory for the first time. Statistics will require the use of large data sets and there will be greater emphasis on interpretation and inference, rather than on reproducing routine techniques.. It will be essential for teachers to be trained so that material that is new to them is taught consistently and to a high standard. In the view of the panel, it will also be necessary to maintain a continuing dialogue between the awarding organisations, Ofqual and subject experts so that prototype sample assessments can be reviewed. Otherwise,



there is a risk that the examinations, and taught content, will not reflect the recommendations of the panel.

In the view of the panel, wider contextual matters, beyond the content of the A level and AS level, continue to put at risk the success of the new mathematics qualifications. The panel chair wrote to DfE about these in July 2014 (see [www.alcab.org.uk/correspondence](http://www.alcab.org.uk/correspondence)) and those concerns remain.

The panel's comments on some of the main points raised in responses to the consultation are set out below:

- Qualification size: There were consistent concerns regarding the amount of content, particularly in the AS qualification. The panel has therefore made adjustments, removed some content entirely and moved some items from AS to A level.
- Mathematical problem solving: It was clear from responses to the consultation that many were unsure what was meant by "mathematical problem solving" and what this meant for the kinds of tasks that would be set in the new A level. The panel has discussed this with Ofqual and the awarding organisations. ALCAB remains of the view that mathematical problem-solving should be at the heart of the new A level. This goes further than simply reducing the amount of "scaffolding" in some questions set, and involves requiring students to apply mathematical knowledge with understanding.
- Some respondents queried the prescription of 100% of the content of the new A level mathematics and argued for more flexibility for schools and awarding organisations to select the content most appropriate for them. The ALCAB panel reaffirmed its support for 100% prescribed content. University departments had told ALCAB that they currently did not know what mathematical topics students with an A level would have studied, due to the variation in content available in the current qualification. The panel believes that the content prescribed is essential for a quality mathematics qualification at this level. They recognise that in practice, the content chosen from the many options available in the past reflected the expertise of the teachers available and that the new, prescribed, content will be challenging in that respect.
- There were conflicting views on the amount and the content of the requirements for statistics and mechanics. The panel considered these



views, but concluded that the amount of content was about right to meet the needs of the diverse range of end-users. The panel also confirmed the balance between statistics and mechanics, with slightly more emphasis on the former, at this level.

### **Advice**

**Subject to the changes described above, other changes made to points of detail and the wider concerns previously raised by the panel, ALCAB concludes that the revised content is suitable for the new A level and AS level qualifications. However, for the reasons given above, ALCAB advises that the first teaching date should be no earlier than 2017.**



## Geography

The geography panel has considered carefully the responses to the consultation on draft content for AS and A level. They noted that some responses were themselves the result of consultation of members of the responding organisation, including large numbers of teachers.

The draft content reflected the panel's recommendation of core content which would support transition to higher education. Core topics emphasised understanding of human and physical processes through the study of Landscape Systems, Water and Carbon Cycling, Global Systems and Global Governance and Changing Places. Fieldwork and specified geographical skills were to be required as part of this core learning. Specifications were expected to build on the understanding of process gained from the core to engage students in an informed manner with challenges facing society and the environment today.

The consultation responses showed significant support for many aspects of the specification including the degree of prescription, the emphasis on fieldwork and the nature of the core content. They did, however, raise some questions about interpretation and practicability of the requirements, and the panel has recommended a number of changes to address these.

The content of the AS and A levels is designed to reflect the approaches to geography that are taken by universities and geographical organisations today. The panel realise that some of the new content and the language used to describe it may be unfamiliar to some teachers of the current qualifications. In the panel's view it will be essential for subject-based training opportunities to be made available to prepare teachers for the new A and AS levels. The revised draft content contains explanatory text where required to avoid misunderstandings about topics which will be new to some users.

### Specific points

**Fieldwork:** In ALCAB's view fieldwork is an essential part of the A level and the AS level and should be done in both human and physical geography. At least two days of fieldwork should be undertaken for the AS qualification and a total of at least four days for A level. This position received strong support from several respondents. However, consultation responses raised a number of questions about how the fieldwork should be assessed at each level. There were also questions about how to ensure that A level candidates had done fieldwork in both human and physical geography, even if their individual research topic, which requires the collection of primary data, was more specialised. The panel considered these issues, in consultation with Ofqual, who said that they would require an assurance from heads of centres that candidates have undertaken the required fieldwork. The panel welcomes that decision and have concluded that the position reached on fieldwork in the new qualifications is the best possible, given the constraints under which the exercise was undertaken.

- **Size:** There was mixed feedback on the scale of the content with some



suggesting it was about right, while others (including some teachers) judged that the core content was too large. On reflection the panel felt that some minor reductions in scale were appropriate and have made reductions in a number of places.

- Several consultation responses raised the issue of comparability of the core content themes. The panel felt that it was important not to conflate the length of the content description with intended weight in the curriculum. However, the panel recommended a number of places where changes to the wording of the core material would be helpful and the final version of the content reflects those changes.
- The independent study (A level): There has been some discussion about how to ensure that A level students genuinely select their own topic for study, without making regulatory requirements that are unrealistic for schools and colleges. The intention of the panel is that the individual project should reflect a hypothesis or question defined, developed, investigated and written up by the student individually. The independent study will incorporate field data and evidence and may also draw on secondary data. While some students may collect field data independently of an organised school field trip, for others, the location and broad scope of the fieldwork that informs the project may be selected by the school or college and data may be collected in groups. In the latter case, students must use data that they have personally collected and may, if appropriate, use data collected by others with whom they have been working.

### Advice

**Subject to the comments in the covering letter from the Chair of ALCAB about the need for adequate preparation and training of teachers, and subject to the changes listed above (and other changes to points of detail), ALCAB concludes that the revised content is suitable for the new A and AS level qualifications.**