

## **Straight A's?**

### **A-level teachers' views on today's A-levels**

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## The research

### Impetus

Each year A-level standards are debated. Without fail, come August there is a pantomime of praise for ‘best ever’ A-level results and an even higher number of A grades, followed by outrage and indignation when the standards of A-levels leading to ever-increasing performance are questioned.

We do not tend, however, to hear the views of teachers in this debate. Partly because the results are out during the school holidays, partly perhaps because teachers – it is assumed – will toe the official line that all is working very well. Save for the odd teacher writing scathingly and anonymously in an op-ed piece, little comes from the ‘horse’s mouth’. Instead, at best, the teaching unions wade in, but their focus is generally on defending the ‘hard work’ of teachers, with little further discussion. What we are not hearing through the most vociferous government versus commentator slanging match is what would in fact be much more useful to hear: what those disseminating the A-level consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of current arrangements.

This research has therefore sought to ask A-level teachers their views on today’s A-levels. Senior A-level teachers, in the form of heads of sixth form and their counterparts in sixth form and further education colleges, were chosen specifically as the ‘population’ in order to gain this insight from practitioners with an overview. That is an overview both of their whole cohort of A-level students as well as an ‘historical’ overview of changes to the A-level, gained either through their teaching experience or through the combination of taking their own A-levels under the linear system and teaching A-level under the modular system.

Speaking to the teachers surveyed, it was clear that many feel that their views in the A-level debate have indeed been overlooked. While some teachers were defensive, the majority were keen to express what they considered to be more informed views on the merits and issues of the current system.

As one head of sixth form in the **North West** commented:

‘It’s a great shame that the reasons we give for why higher grades are being achieved today are not published in the media.’

This research has sought to explore and analyse those reasons; the findings provide a revealing insight.

## **Background to the A-level: Linear to Modular**

Before moving onto the details and findings of the survey, some background on the major changes which have occurred in relation to the A-level is necessary.

The ‘traditional’ A-level involved students taking assessments of their A-level courses at the end of the two-year courses.<sup>1</sup> This is referred to as the ‘linear’ system and the linear A-level. The modular A-level, by contrast, involves students learning several contained areas of learning which they are tested on in isolation. As such, students are examined on the area of learning, moved on to the next area, then examined on it, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2000, all A-levels have become modular, with students taking six modules (now generally reduced to four), examined in a maximum of four exams across the two years of sixth form. The first year’s exams are ‘AS level’ exams and the second’s year’s, more difficult ‘A2 level’ exams. An AS level subject can be discontinued in the first year – if it is continued to A2, then the two levels constitute an A-level. The second major difference between the former linear and current modular A-levels is that the modules (or ‘units’) can be re-taken, allowing students to potentially improve their overall A-level grade. Both AS and A2 exams can be re-taken, up to six times. Analysis of re-sitting patterns shows that AS exams are much more commonly re-sat than A2s.<sup>3</sup>

The two latest major changes to the A-level aim to respond to reported weaknesses in the system: over-examination and insufficient challenge for the most able students.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, the number of modules has been reduced across subjects (with a small number of exceptions) from six to four.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, a new top grade, the A\*, will now be achievable at A-level.

## **Improvement explained**

During the pilot for this survey, one London-based head of sixth form summarised why, in his opinion, A-level results had improved:

‘A number of things underlie improved results. The move from linear to modular has meant that the higher grades are more achievable: the material is more broken up and focused on the exams. Teachers have become more skilled at preparing students for the exams – and the material/syllabus is more targeted towards exam preparation. Then there is the fact that students can do re-sits. I *don’t* think results have improved because students are brighter today.’

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<sup>1</sup> Mansell, W., ‘The multiple problems with tests and exams’, *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Poltico’s, London: 2007, p147

<sup>2</sup> Mansell, W., ‘The multiple problems with tests and exams’, *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Poltico’s, London: 2007, p147

<sup>3</sup> Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, ‘A level re sitting: summary of research findings’, September 2007, QCA/07/3387

<sup>4</sup> Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, ‘Information for Teachers: Changes to AS and A levels: Improving the assessment system’, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, ‘Information for Teachers: Changes to AS and A levels: Improving the assessment system’, 2007

Certainly this assessment is supported by the findings of the survey. The move from linear to modular A-levels in particular has had a profound impact on results, which has been strengthened by the opportunity to improve grades through re-sitting. That it is systemic re-organisation which in the main underlies improved results leads to the conclusion that the annual debate over standards has tended somewhat to miss the point. Assertions about higher grades being down to an intangible notion of declining ‘standards’ is a side-show contention when considering the wholesale structural change to examining arrangements. That is, the way in which performance has been aided by multiplying the exams, narrowing in on highly specified content and providing the opportunity to improve grades through re-sitting. Whether the actual content of A-level courses is less challenging or not is fairly peripheral in the discussion around whether linear and modular A-level performance is comparable. The content clearly matters enormously, but on the point of comparability there is, as many of the teachers surveyed commented, quite simply much more opportunity today for success. Examination of the A-level today clearly illustrates why, without a transformation in calibre of either students or teachers, overall achievement has risen rapidly since its modularisation.

## **The survey**

### *Challenges*

In light of the very public controversy around A-level ‘standards’, there was concern that interviewing teachers involved in A-levels would be an arduous task. Firstly, there was some concern that teachers would not want to be interviewed on the topic, perceiving a survey on A-levels as inevitably seeking to gather evidence of declined A-level standards. Secondly and related, there was concern that those teachers reached would be keen to paint as positive a picture as possible in defence of the A-level, therefore potentially biasing their responses.

On any topic, ensuring that wording and answer options do not generate a bias is always a fundamentally important element of designing a survey. In this case, the controversy around the topic heightened this. As such the focus of the questions, wording and tone of the survey were of particular significance, as was discussing the questions with A-level teachers themselves during the piloting stage.

When it came to carrying out the survey, we found teachers to be much more forthcoming and far less guarded than expected.

### *Methodology: Pilot*

A two-step pilot was carried out across a randomly selected cohort of providers (covering a sixth form attached to a secondary school, a sixth form college, a further education college and an Academy). The first stage of the pilot involved asking heads of sixth form (or the equivalent in further education and sixth form colleges) open-ended questions on their views about changes to the A-level. The focus was broadly on the strengths and weaknesses of the current organisation

of A-levels. The aim at this point was to gauge teachers' views on changes to and defining characteristics of the current A-level, from which to build a comprehensive set of question and answer options. The second stage of the pilot centred on building the specific questions in the questionnaire, starting with reasons for improved grades and ending with a comparison between linear and modular A-levels. The answer options available were selected by drawing the most commonly cited answers during the piloting. The aim was to ensure that the majority of answers were covered by the available options. 'Other' was included to capture any answers which were not offered: the fact that 'other' was selected by very few respondents suggests that the options given successfully accommodated the majority's views. The question and answers were tested and fine-tuned on eight randomly selected teachers, who were aware that they were involved in the piloting stage and very helpfully suggested clarifications/potential pitfalls.

### *Questionnaire*

The final survey questionnaire consisted of five main multiple-choice questions, two subsidiary questions and two open-ended questions: the first asking the teacher which subject they taught, the last asking for any further comments. The questionnaire asked heads of sixth form and the equivalent in further education and sixth form colleges: what they taught and how long they had been teaching A-levels; the main reasons, in their view, that the number of A grades at A-level had risen. (Respondents who picked 'higher achievement is more accessible' and 'A-levels are not sufficiently challenging' were asked to elaborate in a further multiple choice question.); the extent of re-sitting last year in their subject, drawing on last year's Year 13 cohort; the extent of re-sitting in last year across the sixth form as a whole, drawing on last year's Year 13 cohort;<sup>6</sup> the percentage of students who had attained a different overall grade as a result of re-sitting in their subject, drawing on last year's Year 13 cohort; the percentage of students who had achieved a different overall grade as a result of re-sitting across the sixth form as a whole, drawing on last year's Year 13 cohort; whether teachers thought they personally would have achieved the same A-level grades had they done modular A-levels; and finally, whether they had any further comments on today's A-levels. The order of the answer options were varied in order to avoid any bias. It should be noted that the answers to open-ended questions are not quantifiable in the same way as the closed-ended questions. Therefore analysis based on comments is not comparable to analysis based on the data gathered via the survey's closed-ended questions. It should also be noted that a supplementary question and a supplementary answer option were added after the first ten surveys were carried out. The results have been adjusted accordingly.

### *Sampling*

*Population* The targeted 'population' was heads of sixth form and their equivalent in sixth form and further education colleges – generally 'directors/heads of A-level' or 'directors/heads of

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<sup>6</sup> This question was added after the first [10] surveys were completed, meaning that this question and the subsequent question regarding the impact of re-sitting for the sixth form as a whole was not asked to the first [10] teachers surveyed.

curriculum'. The reason for choosing more senior teachers was in order to reach teachers who had an overview of the A-level experience in their institution and who had substantial experience of A-levels, working on the assumption that a certain level of experience was a prerequisite to becoming head of sixth form/A-level or the equivalent. An additional practicality was that heads of sixth form and equivalents were more likely to have their own telephone extension which would facilitate a higher response rate.

*Sampling technique* The sample was drawn-up using the Department for Children, Schools and Families' records of A-level providers in England. From the latest record a list of every maintained A-level provider in this country was compiled (independent providers were excluded). From this list, a subsidiary list of every 10<sup>th</sup> provider was selected, followed by a further list of every 15<sup>th</sup> and a further final list of every 20<sup>th</sup> provider.

*Timing* The research was carried out between 29<sup>th</sup> June and the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2009. Each provider in the sample was contacted by telephone. We asked to be put through to the head of sixth form or equivalent. Once contact was made with a head of sixth form or equivalent the research was introduced as a survey of 'A-level teachers' views about changes to the A-level'. In 10 cases teachers asked for the questionnaire to be emailed to them and in 10 further cases a receptionist asked for the questionnaire to be emailed to the school.

*Response/refusal rate* Out of the providers contacted only six schools refused to participate, two of them via the institution's receptionist, on the grounds of a school-level 'no survey participation' policy, three of them (via the target teacher) on the grounds that they did not have time, and, significantly, only one on the grounds that the teacher did not want to participate in the particular survey. Five teachers did not return emailed questionnaires, however it is not known whether this was on the basis of declining to participate, simply not having the time/forgetting to respond and return the survey or because they did not receive the email in cases when it was passed on by reception. The selected providers were contacted until either a) an interview was secured or b) the school/target teacher refused to participate or c) the school was closed for the summer break or d) an emailed questionnaire was not returned by August 7<sup>th</sup>. A non-response was recorded in the latter two scenarios. 286 providers were contacted yielding 150 responses and a maximum of 11 refusals (including non-response by email). The sample size of 150 is small, however the strength of its representativeness rests on the fact that it is a) a random sample b) a sample drawn from across England and c) that the refusal rate is low. There are no discernable differences between the characteristics (institution type/area/size) of those providers where a response was achieved and those where one was not. The implication is that the achieved sample has therefore not been skewed by non-response.

Altogether 150 teachers were surveyed, following a pilot carried out on 12 schools. Therefore the views of a total of 162 teachers have informed this research.

## **Achieved sample details**

*Number of local authorities represented in the teachers surveyed, by region*

East Anglia 18

East Midlands 20

London 16

North (Yorkshire and the Humber) 7

North East 10

North West 24

South East 17

South West 22

West Midlands 16

## Survey findings

### Overview

#### *Performance in linear vs. today's modular A-levels*

- Of those teachers who expressed a view\* **80%**<sup>7</sup> think that they would have achieved **higher** overall A-level grades under today's modular system
- Of those teachers who expressed a view **15%** think they would have achieved the same overall grades had they taken today's modular A-levels
- Just **4%** of those teachers who expressed a view think that they would achieve **lower** overall grades in today's modular A-levels

\*89% of teachers surveyed expressed a view: 9% [13/150] chose 'don't know' and 2% [3/150] chose 'other': all 'did not do A-levels'

#### *Why more students are achieving As*

- **0%** of teachers considered the increased number of A grades at A-level to be attributable to more able students (both as 'main reason' and overall)
- Just **4%** of teachers considered the main reason for an increased number of A grades at A-level to be better quality teachers
- Only **8%** of teachers considered an increased number of A grades to be attributable to better quality teachers
- The most commonly chosen main reason for the increased number of A grades at A-level was that students know more about what is in the exams: chosen by **43%** of teachers

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<sup>7</sup> Percentages have been rounded-up to the nearest whole number

- **The second most commonly chosen main reason for the increased number of A grades at A-level was re-sits: chosen by 20% of teachers**
- **The most commonly chosen reason overall<sup>8</sup> for an increase in A grades at A-level was that students know more about what is in the exams: chosen by 29% of teachers**
- **The second most commonly chosen reason overall for the increased number of A grades at A-level was that students can re-sit: chosen by 22% of teachers**

*Extent of re-sitting: sixth form as a whole*

- **71%\* of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 think that 50% or more did at least one re-take during their A-levels**
- **58% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 think that 60% or more did at least one re-take during their A-levels**
- **36% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 think that over 80% did at least one re-take during their A-levels**

*Extent of re-sitting: in teachers' subject/subjects<sup>9</sup>*

- **60% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, think that 50% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course**
- **48% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, think that 60% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course**
- **29% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, think that over 80% did at least one re-take over their A-level course**

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<sup>8</sup> i.e. most important, second most important, third most important reasons combined

<sup>9</sup> Some teachers taught more than one subject

***Impact of re-sitting: sixth form as a whole***

- **69% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that 50% or more of students across their sixth form got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**
- **54% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that 60% or more of students across their sixth form got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**
- **36% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that over 80% of students across their sixth form got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**

***Impact of re-sitting: in teachers' subject/subjects***

- **66% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that 50% or more of students, in their subject/subjects, got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**
- **46% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that 60% or more of students, in their subject/subjects, got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**
- **35% of teachers who estimated the impact of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, think that over 80% of students, in their subject/subjects, got a higher overall grade as a result of re-sitting**

## Main findings in depth

### 1. Who was surveyed?

Out of the 150 teachers surveyed, the majority, 73%, have taught for ten years or more. 37% of teachers have taught for 20 years or more and 12% for over 30 years. A small minority of the teachers surveyed, 8%, have taught for less than five years.

#### *Number of years teaching A-level*

Under 5 years [12] <b>8%</b>
5-10 years [28] <b>19%</b>
10-20 years [54] <b>36%</b>
20-30 years [37] <b>25%</b>
More than 30 years [18] <b>12%</b>
Don't know <b>0%</b>
Other [1] <b>1%*</b>

\*Has personally never taught A-levels

As well as being in charge of A-levels, the majority of heads of sixth form and the equivalent are still teaching their specialist subject/subjects.

#### *Subjects taught, by number of teachers*

English [7]
English Literature [16]
Geography [6]
Religious Studies [3]
History [18]
Economics [8]
Physics [14]

Chemistry [6]
Biology [16]
Maths [7]
Business Studies [10]
Health and Social Care [4]
Psychology [12]
Sociology [12]
Drama [3]
Art/Art and Design [7]
Design Technology [1]
Information Technology [4]
Politics/Government [6]
German [2]
French [4]
Applied Science [2]
Music [2]
Media/Film Studies [3]
PE [5]
Law [2]
Travel and Tourism [2]
AQA Extended Project Qual [2]
Ethics and Philosophy [1]
Other: BTECs [1]

## 2. Why teachers think more students are achieving As

The number of A grades achieved at A-level has risen steadily over the last decade. Teachers were asked what they think the main reasons for this increase is. Respondents were given the option to choose up to three answers to explain the increase in A grades. If they wanted to choose more than one option they were asked to rank their answers from 1, the most important reason, to three, the third most important reason. The population for this question has been adjusted to take into account a supplementary answer option added 10 surveys into the research. As it was not known whether this additional option might have altered the respondents' choices, their surveys have been discounted in this question. (It is worth noting however that with the removed surveys included, the results differ little. 0% of these respondents chose that students are more able. The 'main' results which are affected are the additional answer option, 'students can re-sit' (difference of 1%) 'the syllabus is more closely linked to the exam' (difference of 1%), 'teachers are better quality' (difference of 1%); 'overall' 'students are more informed about what will be examined' (difference of 1%).)

Each of the 140 respondents chose a main reason, a total of 106 teachers chose a second reason and a total of 69 chose a third most important reason.

*I. The main reasons that more students are achieving As at A-level today, according to teacher:  
ranked 1-3*

High achievement is more accessible today 1 ( <i>Main</i> ): [13] <b>9%</b> 2 ( <i>Second most important</i> ): [8] <b>8%</b> 3 ( <i>Third most important</i> ): [14] <b>20%</b>
The syllabus is more closely linked to what is in the exams 1: [11] <b>8%</b> 2: [21] <b>20%</b> 3: [11] <b>16%</b>
Students are more informed about what will be examined 1: [60] <b>43%</b> 2: [25] <b>24%</b> 3: [7] <b>10%</b>
Students today are more able 1: [0] <b>0%</b> 2: [0] <b>0%</b> 3: [0] <b>0%</b>
Teachers today are better quality 1: [5] <b>4%</b> 2: [9] <b>8%</b> 3: [11] <b>16%</b>

<p>Students can re-sit</p> <p>1: [28] <b>20%</b></p> <p>2: [30] <b>28%</b></p> <p>3: [10] <b>14%</b></p>
<p>There is greater pressure to achieve As today</p> <p>1: [6] <b>4%</b></p> <p>2: [8] <b>7%</b></p> <p>3: [10] <b>14%</b></p>
<p>A-levels are not sufficiently challenging</p> <p>1: [16] <b>11%</b></p> <p>2: [3] <b>3%</b></p> <p>3: [4] <b>6%</b></p>
<p>I don't know</p> <p>1: [0] <b>0%</b></p> <p>2: [0] <b>0%</b></p> <p>3: [0] <b>0%</b></p>
<p>Other</p> <p>1: [1] <b>1%</b></p> <p>2: [2] <b>2%</b></p> <p>3: [2] <b>3%</b></p>

*II. Overall*

High achievement is more accessible today <b>11%</b>
The syllabus is more closely linked to what is in the exams <b>14%</b>

Students are more informed about what will be examined <b>29%</b>
Students today are more able <b>0%</b>
Teachers today are better quality <b>8%</b>
Students can re-sit <b>22%</b>
There is greater pressure to achieve As today <b>8%</b>
A-levels are not sufficiently challenging <b>7%</b>
I don't know <b>0%</b>
Other <b>1%</b>

The most commonly chosen main reason was 'students are more informed about what is in the exams', chosen by 43% of teachers as the most important reason, by 24% as the second most important reason and by 10% as the third most important reason. Overall (i.e. main, second or third options together) this option was chosen by 29% of teachers surveyed.

*'Students know exactly what they need in the exams now.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

*'Very explicit guidance is given to students about what will be in the exams.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

Some teachers elaborated that this entailed maximised information given by the exam boards:

*'There is a lot of information from examiners today. It's easier to get an A than ten years ago.'* **Director of A-levels, West Midlands**

*'The courses are far more targeted and guided by the exam boards.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

Others commented that the level of information about the exams was distorting teaching:

*'Teachers teach to the test today.'* **South West**

*'Teachers know the syllabus to the point where they're almost teaching to the exam.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

*'There is a lot of coaching today; teachers are much more skilled at teaching to the test.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

A number of teachers expressed considerable frustration at what they perceived to be the current scenario:

*'C or D grade students are now achieving As. There is a real issue with the fact that 25 per cent of students are getting A grades – I find that really ridiculous. It's all about teaching to the test today – it's not a test of ability – you can do very well today without even being able to write properly.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

*'That there is any teaching to think today is absolute nonsense, there's a formula to pass the exams. It's absolutely pathetic now. It's total nonsense that things have improved.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

*'I would love to see exams where they gauge a true reflection of students' abilities rather than their preparation for the exams.'* **Head of A-levels, South West**

The second most commonly chosen reason for the increase in the number of A grades attained was 'students can re-sit', chosen by 20% of teachers as the main reason, 28% as the second most important reason (making it the most popular second main reason) and 14% as the third most important reason. Overall this option was chosen by 22% of teachers.

*'It's the chance to re-take – I'm very sure that this is the key to success today.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

*'With re-takes etc it's really easy to do well today.'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

No teachers surveyed thought that A-level results have risen on account of more able students. This is the one answer which teachers were consistently certain did not apply. A large number of teachers emphasised 'definitely not that one', when this option was read out.

Notably, the percentage of teachers who thought that the number of top grades had risen primarily on account of better quality *teachers* was also very small – 4%. Furthermore, of those teachers who did select this option, many elaborated that it was not so much a case of better quality teachers as teachers being more informed about exam content.

Some teachers, 11%, simply did not regard A-levels to be sufficiently challenging:

*'This is Mickey Mouse stuff – what they learn at A-level today is not sufficient for GCSE. The system is an absolute shambles, the standard of candidates is very low – it's a national disgrace.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

*'You could train a monkey to do the questions today!'* **Director of A-levels, North West**

*'The new specifications have dumbed it down definitely. The questions in the exams are very wishy washy – Year 8's can do some of the questions. It's not sufficiently challenging for academic A-levels.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

A primary concern amongst those who thought that A-levels were not sufficiently challenging was that the most able students were not sufficiently stretched:

*'In terms of languages it's definitely easier – the new AQA, the board we use, AS specification is easy! There is less of a jump from GCSE to A-level and it doesn't challenge the brightest pupils. We have to supplement the syllabus to stretch the brighter ones.'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

This was not a preoccupation for all teachers however. One head of sixth form who felt that A-levels were 'too easy' today, was keen that they stay that way – to keep up the school's results.

*'They're definitely not challenging enough – but we don't want them any more difficult or our results would go down!'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

This comment reflects the significance of the grades attained at A-level (see Conclusion for discussion).

### **Subsidiary questions**

Two subsidiary questions were asked of those respondents who chose 'higher achievement is more accessible today' (chosen by 35 in total) and 'A-levels are not sufficiently challenging' (chosen by 23 in total).

*Main reason why higher achievement is more accessible today*

The modular system in which learning is in smaller chunks [16] <b>46%</b>
Syllabuses concentrate on a smaller amount of material [0] <b>0%</b>
Re-sits enable more students to achieve high grade [10] <b>29%</b>
The syllabus is more closely linked to what is in the exams [4] <b>11%</b>
Exam boards provide more guidance on exam content [0] <b>0%</b>
Grade boundaries have been lowered [0] <b>0%</b>
Don't know [0] <b>0%</b>

Other [5] <b>14%</b>
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*Main reason why A-levels are not sufficiently challenging*

Grade boundaries are too low [3] <b>13%</b>
Learning is only bite-size [6] <b>26%</b>
The A-level curriculum is too narrow [0] <b>0%</b>
Because students can re-sit their exams [4] <b>17%</b>
Because the syllabus is heavily focussed on what is in the exam [0] <b>0%</b>
Don't know [0] <b>0%</b>
Other [10] <b>43%</b>

### 3a. Re-sits: extent of re-sitting

Teachers were asked about the extent of re-sitting amongst their last year's Year 13 cohort i.e. the last cohort of students for whom they knew their final results. They were asked to estimate the percentage of students who had taken at least one re-sit over the course of their A-level studies. After the first round of ten surveys a supplementary question was added to the questionnaire, asking teachers about the A-level cohort as a whole (right across subjects) for their last year's Year 13, as well as for the same cohort of students in their subject/subjects.

Firstly, teachers were asked about the level of re-taking within their subject/subjects.

#### *I. Percentage of students who did at least one re-take across the A-level course, in teachers' subjects*

None [7] <b>5%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [6] <b>4%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [8] <b>5%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent [14] <b>9%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [12] <b>8%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [16] <b>11%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [10] <b>7%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [15] <b>10%</b>
Over 80 per cent [37] <b>25%</b>
Don't know [4] <b>3%</b>
Other [1] <b>1%</b>
NA [16] <b>11%</b>

II. Percentages out of those able to estimate a percentage of students who did at least one re-take across the A-level course, in teachers' subjects (i.e. minus 'Don't know'/'Other'/'NA')

None [7] <b>5%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [6] <b>5%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [8] <b>6%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent [14] <b>11%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [12] <b>9%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [16] <b>12%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [10] <b>8%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [15] <b>12%</b>
Over 80 per cent [37] <b>29%</b>

Just 5% of teachers who estimated the number of re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, said that none of their students had taken at least one re-sit in their subject, and just 3% said that fewer than 10% of their students had taken at least one re-sit in their subject/subjects. 60% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects think that 50% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course. (11% of teachers do not currently teach (denoted by 'NA')). 48% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, think that 60% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course, in their subject. 29% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13, in their subject/subjects, think that at over 80% did at least one re-take over their A-level course. Out of the 'over 80%' responses, the most commonly chosen percentage was 100% ('did at least one re-sit') chosen by 49% of teachers.

Asked (as a supplementary open question) about which exams students had re-taken the majority of teachers stated that the majority of re-takes were AS level exams, though a minority amongst those asked cited students also re-taking A2 level exams. This finding is in line with other research on re-sitting patterns.<sup>10</sup> Asked about the number of times students were re-sitting the same module, the majority of teachers stated just the one time, though approximately a third of those who were asked said that students had been known to take multiple re-sits.

<sup>10</sup> Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 'A level re sitting: summary of research findings', September 2007, QCA/07/3387

Secondly, teachers were asked to estimate the number of students who had re-sat in the A-level cohort as a whole (right across subjects) for their last year's Year 13.

*I. Percentage of students who did at least one re-take across the A-level course: overall*

None	<b>0%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent	[6] <b>4%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent	[5] <b>3%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent	[3] <b>2%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent	[8] <b>5%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent	[8] <b>5%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent	[14] <b>9%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent	[12] <b>8%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent	[11] <b>7%</b>
Over 80 per cent	[38] <b>25%</b>
Don't know	[17] <b>11%</b>
Other	[0] <b>0%</b>
NA	[28] <b>19%</b>

*II. Percentages out of those able to estimate the percentage of students who did at least one re-take across the A-level: overall (minus 'Don't know'/'Other'/'NA')*

None	<b>0%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent	[6] <b>6 %</b>
Between 10-20 per cent	[5] <b>5%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent	[3] <b>3%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent	[8] <b>8%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent	[8] <b>8%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent	[14] <b>13%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent	[12] <b>11%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent	[11] <b>11%</b>
Over 80 per cent	[38] <b>36%</b>

No teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 said that none of their students had taken at least one re-sit, with just 6% estimating that fewer than 10% of their students had taken at least one re-sit. 71% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 thought that 50% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course. 58% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 thought that 60% or more did at least one re-take over their A-level course, in their subject. 36% of those teachers who estimated the number of re-sits sat by their last year's Year 13 thought that over 80% did at least one re-take over their A-level course.

### 3b. Impact of re-sitting

Teachers were then asked about the impact which re-sitting had had on students' overall A-level grades. Firstly this was asked in relation to teachers' own subjects.

#### *I. Percentage of students who achieved a different overall A-level grade as a result of re-sitting: teacher's subject/subjects*

None [8] <b>5%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [7] <b>5%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [5] <b>3%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [8] <b>5%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent [7] <b>5%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [7] <b>5%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [27] <b>18%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [9] <b>6%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Over 80 per cent [45] <b>30%</b>
Don't know [8] <b>5%</b>
Other [0] <b>0%</b>
NA [15] <b>10%</b>

#### *II. Percentages out of those able to estimate the percentage of students who achieved a different overall A-level grade as a result of re-sitting: teacher's subject/subjects (minus 'Don't know'/'Other'/'NA')*

None [8] <b>6%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [7] <b>6%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [5] <b>4%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [8] <b>6%</b>

Between 30-40 per cent [7] <b>6%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [7] <b>6%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [27] <b>21%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [9] <b>7%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Over 80 per cent [45] <b>35%</b>

Out of those teachers who estimated just 6% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 did not secure them a higher overall A-level grade. Just 6% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured fewer than 10% of students a higher overall A-level grade. 66% of teachers thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured 50% or more of students a higher overall A-level grade. 35% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured over 80% of students a higher overall A-level grade.

The next stage of questioning asked teachers to think about the impact of re-sitting across the whole sixth form. Again, thinking back to their last year's Year 13 cohort, teachers were asked to estimate the percentage of students who had taken at least one re-sit.

*I. Percentage of students who achieved a different overall A-level grade as a result of re-sitting: overall*

None [0] <b>0%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [5] <b>3%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent [4] <b>3%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [13] <b>9%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [16] <b>11%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [11] <b>7%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [7] <b>5%</b>
Over 80 per cent [35] <b>23%</b>
Don't know [22] <b>15%</b>
Other [0] <b>0%</b>
NA [29] <b>19%</b>

II. Percentages out of those able to estimate the percentage of students who achieved a different overall A-level grade as a result of re-sitting: overall (minus 'Don't know'/'Other'/'NA')

None [0] <b>0%</b>
Fewer than 10 per cent [4] <b>4%</b>
Between 10-20 per cent [4] <b>4%</b>
Between 20-30 per cent [5] <b>5%</b>
Between 30-40 per cent [4] <b>4%</b>
Between 40-50 per cent [13] <b>13%</b>
Between 50-60 per cent [16] <b>16%</b>
Between 60-70 per cent [11] <b>11%</b>
Between 70-80 per cent [7] <b>7%</b>
Over 80 per cent [35] <b>35%</b>

Out of those teachers 0% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 did not secure them a higher overall A-level grade. Just 4% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured fewer than 10% of students a higher overall A-level grade. 69% of teachers thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured 50% or more students a higher overall A-level grade. 35% thought that the re-sits taken by their last year's Year 13 secured over 80% of students a higher overall A-level grade.

There were many negative comments about re-sits.

*'There are so many re-sits now and there is no depth of knowledge. It's gone too far now to the point where it is driven by statistics – it's not education now it's a numbers game. They go to the wrong universities due to re-sits: if they re-take lots of times they bump up their mark but if they can't even do an AS first time round, how are they fit for university?'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

Subsequently many thought that re-sits should be re-thought.

*'There are now 200 hundred chances to succeed – the question is why can't they do it the first time round?'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

*'Re-sits should be banned!'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

A recurring reason why teachers thought re-sits should be scrapped was because of the impact that they had on both the course and the students.

*'With re-sits you can get a much higher grade than otherwise. The downside is that far more students get As. It's not good from the point of education, it's repeating ad nauseam.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

A number of teachers felt that the re-sits allowed students to 'slack' without consequences – defeating the purpose of the continuous assessment model of the modular A-level.

*'There is a real problem with re-sits and the re-sit culture – I would abolish them. 'Getting rid of the opportunity to re-sit would make them work hard in the first place.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North**

*'If they couldn't do re-sits students would work harder and do better the first time.'* **London**

*'If students didn't have the ability to re-sit they'd take it more seriously. Maybe the option of re-sits gives students a false sense of security.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

Other teachers were however more optimistic about the opportunity to re-sit – seeing it as a positive advantage for students today.

*'More students are passing and doing well at A-level today because they realise they're failing and can sort that out – whereas under the previous system it would have been too late.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

*'With our intake students need every chance they can get.'* **Director of A-levels, East Midlands**

A negative effect of re-sits for both students and teachers was seen to be the fact that there is now continuous pressure to focus on exams.

*'There are far too many re-sits and exams. There is pressure to re-sit even if you are only a few marks below a grade. It's a real shame that just three months after their GCSEs students have exams and then again and then again.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

3. Whether teachers think they would have performed the same today

The final question asked teachers to compare their experience of *taking* A-levels themselves, with their experience of *teaching* them. It was assumed that these senior teachers would have been teaching A-level for a number of years, and therefore would have taken their own A-levels under the linear system. This was indeed the case: all the teachers surveyed, apart from two non-British origin teachers who had not personally taken A-levels, had done linear A-levels.

*I. How teachers think they would have performed under the modular system, compared to under the linear*

I think I would have achieved the same overall A-level grades [22] <b>15%</b>
I think I would have achieved lower overall A-level grades [5] <b>3%</b>
I think I would have achieved higher overall A-level grades [107] <b>71%</b>
Don't know [13] <b>9%</b>
Other [3] <b>2%</b>

*II. Percentage out of those teachers who expressed a view (minus 'Don't know'/'Other')*

I think I would have achieved the same overall A-level grades [22] <b>16%</b>
I think I would have achieved lower overall A-level grades [5] <b>4%</b>

I think I would have achieved higher overall A-level grades [107] **80 %**

Out of those teachers who had a view, the vast majority thought they would have achieved higher overall A-level grades today. Significantly fewer than a quarter (16%) of those teachers with a view thought they would have achieved the same overall A-level grades under the current modular system as they did in the linear system.

It is worth noting that a significant number (approximately half) of those teachers who thought they would have achieved the same grades if they had done modular A-levels stated that that was because they ‘could not have achieved higher grades’.

*‘I would have done much better today. The fact that the courses are broken down into chunks means that you only have to revise a bit at a time. And the re-sits make a huge difference.’* **Head of A-levels, South West**

The opportunity to re-sit and the concurrent spreading out of exams and narrowing of learning within the modular system, were frequently cited as the explanation for why teachers thought they would have achieved higher grades in the modular A-levels than they did doing linear A-levels.

*‘The opportunity to re-sit would have improved my grades.’* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

Re-sits aside, the modular system more generally was thought to help better performance more generally.

*‘I would have got higher grades today because you don’t have to do it all in Year 13, in two three hour exams.’* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

*‘I would have done better today because there is no longer one exam at the end of two years and instead the course is broken down into smaller sections. It is easier in that respect.’* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

*‘Because A-levels are modular I would have achieved higher grades – because the course is in little bits, you can take short steps.’* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*‘I got straight As, so couldn’t have improved, but linear A-levels were much harder – it’s easier to get an A today.’* **Director of A-levels, West Midlands**

Many teachers referred to the structure of the modular system as enabling ‘chunking’ with the course allowing students to focus on ‘chunks’.

*'The "chunking" of the A-level makes it better focused.'* **Head of A-levels, South West**

*'Learning in bite-sized chunks makes a big difference; and you can prepare for the exam knowing what will be in it.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

Related to this, other teachers also felt that having to 'remember everything' at the end within the linear system was more difficult.

*'You're assessed on work that you've just done. It was a lot more challenging to have to do the exams at the end and remember everything.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

This difference was pertinently illustrated by one teacher:

*'Results shot up when we introduced modular A-levels – modular makes a massive difference.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

On the whole, therefore, the 'system' rather than the content was seen to be what had become – euphemistically – 'more accessible' – or – in the balder terminology of others – 'easier'.

(Although some teachers did feel that the actual content of the course and the exams is not of a high enough standard, notably amongst the 11% who considered the increase in A grades to be attributable to 'insufficiently challenging' A-levels.)

*'The modular A-level is easier: the content is no easier but the style of examining makes it much easier.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

Some felt that this was problematic, undermining the 'gold standard' of the A-level:

*'The system is definitely easier – it's ridiculous and pathetic now.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

Others felt that the modular system distorted the courses:

*'There is concern with the modular A-levels, that they are narrowing the syllabus. The questions are not appreciably easier though, but the modular A-level is a bit restrictive.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*'I would get rid of the modular system to be honest. It's very stressful and there's very little enjoyment of learning. It's all about preparation for the exams. It's all about teaching for the exams.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

*'I don't think the modular system actually works because students end up taking exams all through the course.'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

*'It isn't how it used to be: there used to be a necessity for a body of knowledge, which there isn't now – but it is important for students to have that.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

In line with this attitude, several teachers felt that the re-introduction of the linear system would be welcome.

*'We're running a pilot in September for moving to the Pre-U because we don't think that current levels stretch the most able students. The Pre-U is linear and there are no re-sits.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

Not all teachers however want to go back to a 'tougher' system – on the basis of this notion of fairness:

*'No, I wouldn't want to go back to a linear system because the modular system allows students to feel that they're achieving, that they're succeeding.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

In the same vein, some teachers felt that greater opportunity for success was a service to students:

*'The new specification is more accessible for weaker students.'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

*'I think the A-level is possibly more accessible today.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

*'There are more opportunities to do well.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*'A system based on one-off performance was quite cruel.'* **Director of Curriculum, North**

*'The modular system gives students a kick up the backside.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

*'I think the system is fairer now, regardless of what people say about them being easier – but it is leading to a degree of grade inflation.'* **Director of A-levels, Yorkshire and the Humber**

*'The modular system is the most effective way to get more people into university, it makes university much more accessible.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South West**

This 'accessibility' was not always however equated with being 'easier'. In the words of the same teacher: 'The style of learning is very different – but that's not the same as them being easier.'

## Conclusions and discussion

It is quite clear that the A-levels of today are not comparable with those of the past on simple grounds that only 15 per cent of teachers think they would have achieved the same overall grades had they taken today's modular, instead of the linear A-levels which they did take. The fact that the majority of teachers think they would have achieved higher A-levels grades today tells us that teachers consider the modular A-level to be more amenable to doing well in. Many teachers did not say that they thought modular A-levels were 'easier' (although some teachers said just that). Nevertheless, if students stand a better chance of achieving higher grades today, it is difficult to argue that this does not boil down to A-levels being 'easier'.

Teachers say they would have not have achieved the same grades, but on the whole would have done better because of the 'advantages' that the current modular system gives students when it comes to performance. The reality is that comparisons with the pre-modular system are spurious. Today students have more than one chance to achieve their overall A-level grade, whereas in the past (save for entire A-level re-sits) there was only one opportunity. To deduce therefore that schools and students are better because results have risen is clearly erroneous: the two systems, their respective merits and weaknesses aside, are incomparable. It is not legitimate for the government to say that things have improved, therefore. The goal posts have not been moved, the rules of the game have been changed.

Yet whether the government's claims are accurate or spurious is in itself of little consequence. Claiming credit when credit is not due does not matter – what does matter is if the gains being made in terms of results are in fact being made at the expense of students' learning.

The views of the teachers surveyed strongly indicated that the A-level has become a gauge of exam preparation rather than ability. Some teachers considered this to be right and 'fairer', others considered it to be problematic.

Arguably, the difference between today's modular A-levels and the previous linear A-levels is that hard work is more likely to pay off in the current system. This is one of the reasons why some teachers consider it to be fairer.

*'With the modular system and the opportunity to re-sit hardworking students have more of a chance of success.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North East**

The reason that this greater perceived 'fairness' is seen to be important is because of the significance attached to entry to university.

*'There is more competition now and more and more go to university.'* **Head of Sixth Form, Yorkshire and the Humber**

The issue with A-levels today is not whether students are working hard or not – according to the teachers surveyed they are, and possibly even working harder than in the past. One reason why teachers may bend over backwards to defend A-levels is because of their frustration with accusations that success at A-level today requires no work from either teachers or students. A significant number of teachers, many of whom thought that A-levels were essentially easier, felt that students – and teachers – now had to work harder than before.

*'It's unfortunate because it's not students' faults – they can only do what they're given. The media hype is unfair on students working their guts out.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

(Not everyone felt that way it should be noted: *'Students are lazy and fall back on re-sits.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**)

Rather the issues lies with the purpose of the A-level course today. It is clear that A-levels are no longer perceived as serving a purpose in themselves but instead as being a means to an end: entry to university. There are several weaknesses with this approach. Firstly the assumption is that all A-level students will go into higher education. This assumption is directly connected to the government's higher education target. Secondly, with entry to university the focus of A-levels, the A-level courses are now focused on maximising A-level grades. In this respect the A-level has become a good with little inherent value, and the content of courses have been narrowed, with that content focused on what will be tested. The existing 're-sit culture' is directly connected to the emphasis on the 'means-to-an-end' approach.

One would hope that A-level grades reflected the experience of the A-level course; today, the experience of the A-level course reflects the pursuit of the grade. In other words, the focus on the final grades attained is now so great that the entire course is structured around it.

*'There is definitely more of a focus on the exams; it's much more about getting the grade.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

Another implication of the focus on grades is the subjects chosen. Some students – and teachers – are put off certain subjects because they are less ‘safe’ in terms of exam results.

*‘There is a vast difference in difficulty between the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ subjects. So no one wants to take, for example, physics, because they might get a better grade doing a soft subject.’*

**Director of A-levels, South East**

This teacher sees the solution as being not simply a move away from ‘grade fixation’, but also raising the bar generally and removing the ‘soft option’:

*‘I would much rather it was harder in the soft subjects because then they could hold their heads up high.’*

*‘You teach the syllabus which is tailored to the exam, so there is not as much chance to go off on a tangent. That does mean that you cannot branch out. But it helps you focus.’* **Head of Sixth Form, Yorkshire and the Humber**

Several teachers commented on the irony of the fact that whenever they went ‘off course’ (literally) in discussion around their subject, they were ‘reprimanded’ by students; very different, commented one head of sixth form, from the days of deliberate attempts to distract the teacher.

*‘Teachers don’t have the time and space to cover interesting things which do not directly relate to the syllabus.’* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

While ‘spreading the load’ through modular courses and exams was supposed to alleviate exam pressure, the effect, together with re-sits, has been the reverse.

*‘The modular system can be a massive detriment to pupils. There is pressure very early on to prepare for exams and much teaching time is lost on exam preparation.’* **Head of Sixth Form, North West**

The emphasis on exams is thought to be putting too much pressure on students as well as constricting the curriculum.

*‘There is too much exam pressure now.’* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

*‘Having been through GCSEs the year before it seems as though we are over testing them.’* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

In terms of concerns about the current system, the focus tended to be on the problematic effects of the re-sits. The most common criticism of the re-sits was the time that they eat up during the course.

*‘Re-takes are out of proportion – it’s hard to balance re-takes and the current exams.’* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

Several teachers also commented that the impact of AS re-sitting was misleading. Most re-sits, according to teachers, are on the less challenging AS papers, therefore overall performance is being boosted by stronger knowledge of the easier content. With high percentages of teachers thinking that the overall A-level grades of their students had been boosted by re-takes, this is a significant reality.

Another important concern raised by teachers was the cost of re-sits. A number of heads of sixth form thought that the cost of re-sitting may, generally carried by students' families, may be creating an inequality.

*'The cost of re-sits don't affect our leafy catchment area, parents just pay, but I think it could be a real problem in some areas.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

*'The re-sits issue is not being addressed and it causes inequality as the better off can afford re-sits, if it's down to the parents.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

*'This school is in an affluent catchment area but in other schools the cost of re-sits may have a huge impact.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

*'Re-sits are inequitable; there are financial implications with the re-sits, can they stump up the cash?'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

Another source of unfairness was noted by a music teacher:

*'It's not fair that some subjects don't offer January re-takes, it disadvantages the students. For example in music [teacher's subject], all the exams are in the summer with our board.'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*Reservations remain*

The most recent changes to be made to today's A-levels are the reduction in the number of modules, from six modules to four modules, and the introduction of the A\*. In addition, new syllabus specifications regarding content will have implications for students going into upper sixth (Year 13) in September. With regards to the changes in relation to the number of modules and the new top grade, a number of teachers touched on them. The reduction in the number of modules is something which was welcomed by many teachers.

*'The reduction of the modules is welcome – four is about right, there was a tendency to over-repeat re-sits under the old system. There is too much exam pressure now.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Anglia**

Nevertheless fewer modules were not thought to be getting to the heart of concerns around re-taking and exam pressure. Few teachers expressed views on the A\*, with those that did generally expressing either a lack of conviction about the asserted beneficial impact it would have or

scepticism about how it would be received by universities or the extent to which it would stretch the most able pupils.

*'I'm uncertain about the A\*'; there is too much trust in the exam – it's not reliable enough at the top end and markers will be confused by A\* quality. The A\* will put more pressure on students who would otherwise be comfortably in the A range.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North East**

*'We're all waiting in anticipation about what the A\* will bring.'* **Head of Sixth Form, North East**

*'Certainly speaking to university admissions officers the A\* is being ignored because it will put off candidates.'* **Head of Sixth Form, West Midlands**

Some were, however, more positive:

*'I think the introduction of the A\* is a good thing, it's something to target those who find the exams too easy.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

In short, latest changes to the A-level are not expected by teachers to address the existing weaknesses. On the contrary, one thing which was strongly asserted by a number of teachers, was the need to cease what they considered to be 'relentless' changes to the A-level.

*'I just wish that there weren't so many changes – the government needs to give schools and education a chance to settle in. Less change please!'* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*'Wouldn't it be nice not to have to change every few years? We've got innovation fatigue. Teachers would like to see a syllabus in place and no change for a while.'* **Head of Sixth Form, East Midlands**

*Can the modular A-level work?*

Modular A-levels can potentially be fit for purpose if a) the chunks are broader than more or less what is in the exams b) the chunks can be put together to develop a body of knowledge (an aim of the revised A2 specification). In practice there is currently far too great a tendency for the course content to be moulded to the examined snapshot, therefore significantly narrowing the entirety of the course content.

The merit of the modular exam is that it allows students to convey their knowledge and understanding of the course, rather than their ability to perform in an exam. In this respect, spreading examination over four exams moves away from the 'sudden death' experience of

having all the exams at the end of the two year. The problem, however, is that the modular exams have become precisely about the ability to perform in exams.

The final A2 exams in theory test a greater overview of accumulated understanding and knowledge in a subject. This level of examination is fundamental, and one of the specific reasons why it is imperative that re-sits be dropped is because a significant number of students are getting overall grades which reflect their easier AS exam scores (bolstered by re-sits) which does not provide an accurate picture of their overall level in the subject. The A\* itself will not be achievable through the AS, a move in the right direction. However, all other grades will continue to be. Arguably, therefore, the A\* is a sticking plaster which, crucially, will cover only the top percentage of students.

*'The A\* will help, but they won't address the fundamental problem.'* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

## Points of recommendation

### *Sever syllabus from exams*

Several teachers argued that those benefitting the most from the current organisation of A-levels were the exam boards: particularly in relation to re-sits. Linking back to the notion that the A-level has become a means to an end – high grades for entry to university – the exam boards are, more than ever, capitalising on this reality, jostling to make their syllabuses and exams maximally 'accessible' grade-wise – be it by somewhat notorious 'seminars' for teachers or more general guidance materials provided by schools. Not to mention lining their pockets every time a student re-sits.

It should not be in the interests of those setting the syllabus to make sure that students achieve high grades in the exam. In order to allow a variety of syllabuses a 'market' should be allowed. What is to be avoided are syllabuses and exams designed to maximise exam grades rather than learning. By having one body set the exams there would be no interest in facilitating performance, on the contrary there would be an interest in ensuring consistency and comparability.

### *Scrap re-sits*

When re-sitting is allowed, then revision – once again an exam focus – becomes a core part of the course. Re-sitting should be dropped.

### *A practicality: hold AS level exams later*

A number of teachers brought up a practical issue which they considered to be problematic for students and teachers alike: the timing of the AS exams. Currently the AS exams finish six weeks before the end of the summer term. This means that having finished their AS courses and

exams, students have a long period of what one frustrated teacher referred to as ‘dead’ time, until term finishes:

*‘I don’t understand why AS exams are in May – it makes no sense to have four or five weeks of not a great deal happening.’* **Head of Sixth Form, London**

*‘There is a real issue with what do you do with students when they’ve finished their AS’s. It leads to poor attendance.’* **Head of Sixth Form, North East**

*‘In the sixth form generally we have found that students find it hard to get back into studying during the period between their AS level exams and the summer holiday.’* **Head of Sixth Form, South East**

Several teachers acknowledged that schools can use the time to start the A2 course, however this was seen to be disjointed and unsatisfactory as it was thought students would ‘forget’ much of the material covered, over the summer break.