

where to go for help

There is no need to deal with worries on your own. Support and advice are always available.

► **Teachers** will be able to give you advice on a whole range of issues, from revision techniques to career or university choices.

► **Organisations** are also able to offer help and support:

www.qca.org.uk

Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system. Includes an online version of this guide.

www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications

Information on qualifications.

www.connexions.gov.uk

Free advice and counselling for 13- to 19-year-olds on everything from revision and stress to higher education options. Call their helpline on 080 800 13219 or text 07766 413 219.

www.aimhigher.ac.uk

Lots of information on university life and careers.

www.learndirect.co.uk

Help in finding the right courses. Call them free on 0800 100 900.

www.need2know.co.uk

Information and advice from the Department for Education and Skills on everything from qualifications to jobs, and loads more.

QCA wishes to make its publications widely accessible. Please contact us if you have specific accessibility requirements.

www.jcq.org.uk

Visit here for a post-results services booklet.

www.theeab.org.uk

Information about the exam appeals process.

www.ucas.com

The universities and colleges admissions service. Track your application progress here.

For more free copies of this booklet:

Telephone: 08700 60 60 15

Orderline: www.qca.org.uk/orderline

Email: orderline@qca.org.uk

Order ref: QCA/05/1510

QCA would like to thank Hillcrest School and Community College for kindly permitting photography on their premises.

AS and A levels

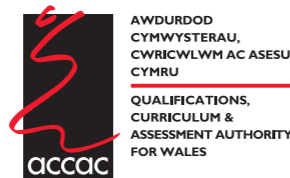
the official student guide to the system



© Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2005



Qualifications and Curriculum Authority



There are around 80 A level subjects and 10 vocational A level subjects

the low-down on A levels

Have you ever wondered who sets your exam paper or what happens to it when you hand it in at the end of your exam? If so, read on! This guide is designed to give you all the information that you need about the A level system.

It's your choice

In the past, A level students typically chose three subjects and sat exams at the end of two years. In 2000, the new AS/A2 system was put in place. An A level usually consists of three AS (advanced subsidiary) and three A2 units. Now, in your first year (usually year 12), you can choose to study up to five subjects, each consisting of three AS units, and sit AS level exams. At the end of your first year you have two options for each subject:

- ▶ take an AS level only and gain a recognised qualification, or
- ▶ continue for a second year and go for the full A level.

Either way, the good news is:

- ▶ AS levels allow you to mix a number of subjects – and you can keep your options open a bit longer.
- ▶ If you're worried about your future after the first year – maybe you want a job or a year out, you can't face more exams or you think a different type of qualification is the way forward for you – you have something to show for your work, rather than feeling you've wasted a year.
- ▶ If you stay on into your A2 year, you have control over the subjects you study. You can pay more attention to the subjects that you enjoy and need for the future. You'll take three A2 units in each subject.

There are 10 new A levels that offer a broad introduction to a vocational area, such as applied business, applied science and travel and tourism.

If you are expecting to get A grades in your A levels, you may want to consider taking an advanced extension award (AEA). If you think this might be for you, see page 12 for more information.

A levels are highly valued by schools, colleges and employers, so they will be useful whatever you are planning to do when you finish your course.

choices





who's who in the A level world

Five awarding bodies, better known as exam boards, cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Your school, college or sixth-form centre chooses a syllabus from one of the exam boards for each subject.

The exam boards are:

AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
www.aqa.org.uk

CCEA (Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk

Edexcel
www.examzone.co.uk or
www.edexcel.org.uk

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
www.ocr.org.uk

WJEC/CBAC (Welsh Joint Education Committee)
www.wjec.co.uk

The exam boards are overseen by the regulatory authorities.

The regulatory authorities are:

ACCAC (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales)
www.accac.org.uk

CCEA (Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk

OCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority)
www.qca.org.uk

As regulators, it's their job to monitor standards and the quality of examining across the exam boards and make sure you get a fair deal.

In 2004, awarding bodies issued 780,000 A level results and 1 million AS results



what happens when?

Each year thousands of students, with the support of their teachers, work hard towards their AS and A level qualifications. Awarding bodies and their regulators take great care to ensure that high standards are maintained from year to year so that students get a fair deal and the grades they deserve.

So, what do the awarding bodies and regulators do, and why?

The syllabus

AS and A levels, like other qualifications, have clear guidelines (known as criteria) that define how the qualification should be set up, what students need to learn and what skills they need to develop. Awarding bodies must make sure that the syllabus they design for each subject meets the rules set by the regulators. The syllabus must be approved by the regulators before schools and colleges can offer it to their students.

Setting the questions

Almost as soon as you begin your A level course, examiners are thinking about what questions will be in your final exam papers. Each exam paper takes about 18 months to prepare.

A principal examiner, appointed by the awarding body, writes the exam paper and creates a detailed explanation of how the paper should be marked. This is passed to a reviser, then to an evaluation committee, and finally to an assessor.

At every stage along the way, experts check that the paper is clear, that there are no trick questions or nasty surprises, that it is of a similar standard to the previous year's paper, and that it can be completed in the time allowed.



Exam day!

Once the papers have been delivered to schools, it's time for you to put your knowledge, understanding and skills to the test.

If you are ready to sit your exam, but on the day something outside your control affects your performance, such as a recent illness or bereavement, you may be eligible for special consideration after the examiners have marked your paper. If you think this applies to you, speak to your teacher as soon as possible after the exam.

Special requirements

The awarding bodies aim to give all students a fair deal. They know that for some students the exam arrangements aren't suitable. For example, some students who have a disability, a learning difficulty or English as a second language may need help. If you don't think the exam arrangements are suitable for you, speak to your teachers. They'll be able to tell you more about special arrangements and advise you.

After the exam day

Marking the papers

It is compulsory for examiners who mark the exam papers and senior examiners who check the marking process to attend what is known as a standardisation meeting. At this meeting the examiners come to an understanding of exactly how to mark the exam. They also mark a number of scripts so that their marking can be checked for accuracy and consistency.

After the standardisation meeting, examiners mark another set of papers. These are also checked. If the marking is not up to standard, the examiner undergoes further training or is not retained by the awarding body. If this happens, the papers are given to another examiner. Further checks throughout the marking process ensure that you get the grades your work deserves.

An A grade at A level is now worth 120 UCAS points and an E is worth 40

Experienced examiners may mark between 300 and 400 scripts each exam season. They are not allowed to have any connection with the school, college or students whose scripts they are marking.

After all the scripts have been marked and returned to the awarding body, more sampling checks are carried out. Individual exam papers are checked to ensure that all the marks have been added up correctly.

Setting the grades

Once all the marking is complete, an awarding meeting takes place. This is when the marks needed for each grade are decided. (This is known as setting the grade boundaries.) This is also when awarding bodies ensure that standards have been and will be maintained.

Guidelines set by the regulators are carefully followed when making each decision. Exam papers from previous years and papers from the current year, as well as expert judgement and technical and statistical information, are used to judge where the grade boundaries should be set.

After the awarding meeting, the accountable officer (a very senior person in each awarding body) considers the senior examiner's recommendations. Usually he or she accepts the recommended grade boundaries. If an accountable officer wishes to move the grade boundaries, there must be sufficient evidence for this decision and the senior examiner has to agree to the change. If the accountable officer and senior examiner disagree, this must be reported and explained to the regulator.



Results!

This is the day you've been waiting for!

UCAS and the universities get the results a few days before schools. This gives them enough time to make arrangements for those who are able to take up offers of a place at university.

Perhaps you've decided that after finishing your A levels you would like to find a job or travel the world. If you've decided that university is not for you, then having A level qualifications will be an advantage in your future career. They are highly valued by employers.

If you want to find out more about how A level marks relate to grades, see the 'how do marks become grades?' section on page 10.

What next?

If you and your teachers aren't happy with your results and feel that something may have been done incorrectly, don't worry – you can take action. You need to contact your school or college immediately. They can request your exam papers from the awarding body so that you can see how your papers have been marked. But don't expect comments telling you where you went wrong! Your school or college can also request your paper be re-marked or the marks added up again. If you are still unhappy and think that the awarding body hasn't followed the correct procedures, then your school or college can appeal to the awarding body. Once all other routes have been exhausted, your school or college can take your appeal to the independent Examinations Appeals Board.

Resits

It is possible to resit each AS and A2 unit, but it is worth remembering that not all units are available to take in January.

If you decide to resit a unit, the awarding body will automatically use the highest mark from your two attempts to count towards your final grade, even if your second attempt is lower than your first. Resitting modules takes time away from studying and preparing for assessments in other units, so it is no easy option!

Cashing in

'Cashing in' is the process of turning your unit marks into final AS or A level grades. If you are happy with your results and you applied to cash in when you entered the exam, you don't need to do anything at all. If you are happy with your results but didn't apply to cash in when you entered the exam, don't worry – you can

still cash in. September is when you normally need to apply to cash in, but speak to your teacher to find out the exact deadline.

If you aren't happy with your results and you applied to cash in when you entered the exam, you can decline your AS grade. But remember that you must do this within the deadline. Your teacher will know the exact date. You can then try to improve your grade by resitting one or more units.

If you accept your AS grade, you can still resit your AS units. You won't be able to use these results to improve your AS grade, but they will count towards your full A level.

If you are unsure about what to do, speak to your teachers – they'll be able to help you.

how do marks become grades?

Look at any results slip and you will see that an AS qualification has a maximum of 300 marks from the three different AS units.



In some subjects, the three units will be worth 100 marks each. In others, the marks available for each unit are slightly different. This is also the case for A2 units.

Each exam paper is unique and so the difficulty of the exam may vary slightly from year to year.

Senior examiners in each subject judge the difficulty of each paper by looking at a sample of candidates' work and exam papers from the current year and from previous years, examiners' reports and statistical data.

They use their professional judgement to decide on the grade boundaries for each paper, using what are called 'raw marks'. For example, you might need 40 raw marks out of 50 for an A grade one year, but 42 out of 50 the next.

To make the unit results compatible and comparable (so that they can be added together to get the final grade, even if they were taken at different times), raw marks from the examiners are converted to points on the uniform mark scale (UMS).

What is the UMS?

On the UMS, the range of marks for a particular grade is the same each year (unlike the range of raw marks for each grade). The range covered by the UMS varies between units. For a unit with a mark out of 100, the ranges of UMS marks for each grade are:
E: 40–49; D: 50–59; C: 60–69; B: 70–79; A: 80–100. The raw mark grade boundaries are then translated into fixed points on the UMS.

For example, if the examiners decided that a raw mark of 90 out of 120 on a unit was the lowest mark for an A grade, then that 90 raw mark would become 80 when translated into the UMS

mark out of 100. If your raw mark lies between the A and B grade boundaries, the proportion of marks you get within the range for that grade is calculated.

If the raw mark needed for a B this year was between 80 and 90 and you got 85 marks, you are halfway up that range. Your UMS mark is then halfway up the 70–80 UMS range, which equals 75 marks. (The score conversion diagram might make this clearer.) The UMS marks for individual units are then added together to give an overall UMS mark for the subject as a whole. The maximum total UMS mark is always 300 for AS levels and 600 for A levels.

Score conversion diagram

	Raw mark	→	UMS mark
Full marks	120	→	100
A grade	90	→	80
Your mark	85	→	75
B grade	80	→	70

Overall AS grade boundaries (marks out of 300) are:

Grade A:	240 marks
Grade B:	210 marks
Grade C:	180 marks
Grade D:	150 marks
Grade E:	120 marks

Overall A level grade boundaries (marks out of 600) are:

Grade A:	480 marks
Grade B:	420 marks
Grade C:	360 marks
Grade D:	300 marks
Grade E:	240 marks

aiming high

Expecting to get A grades? Want a further challenge and the opportunity to be recognised for the breadth and depth of your knowledge? Then AEA's might be for you.

If you are expecting to get A grades in your A levels, you may want to consider taking an AEA. This is designed to provide a further challenge to anyone who is expecting to achieve an A grade.

AEAs are available in 19 subjects: biology, business, chemistry, critical thinking, economics, English, French, geography, German, history, Irish, Latin, maths, physics, psychology, religious studies, Spanish, Welsh and Welsh second language.

If you expect to get an A grade in any subject at A level, you can take an AEA in critical thinking. For all other subjects, it is advisable for you to have studied or be studying the subject at A level before taking an AEA. The AEA in business has been designed so that it can be taken if you have studied either the A level in business studies or applied business.

AEAs are designed so that students from any college or school can take them. If you achieve an AEA you'll receive a merit or distinction.

The good thing about AEA's is that you don't have to study new topics and you have more of an opportunity to show the knowledge you have gained at A level. In order to show that you have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the subject, you will be expected to demonstrate:

- ▶ use of critical analysis
- ▶ good evaluation
- ▶ an ability to pull together different topics.



If you decide to take an AEA, it would be a good idea to try out some past or sample exam papers to help you get used to the different styles of question that appear in AEA exams.

The good news is that from 2006 AEA's will officially count towards your UCAS points score to get into university. However, many universities already count them.

If you think AEA's are for you, speak to your teachers about the possibility of entering. They will be able to provide advice and information.

examine the examiner

Have you ever wondered what examiners are like or what they are looking for when they mark your paper? We tracked down an examiner to get some honest answers to those burning questions ...

» **Aren't examiners just trying to catch me out?**

Just the opposite, in fact. We're trained to make sure everyone gets the marks they deserve.

» **Do you know a grade A paper when you read one?**

Yes and no. I know if an answer is strong and will give it high marks accordingly, but it's only once all the marks are in that the exam board sets the grade boundaries for each paper and decides what mark equals an A and so on.

» **Do exam boards work to a quota of passes and grades?**

No, there are no set numbers for any grades. Students are awarded the grades they have earned.

» **Will I know the examiner who marks my paper?**

No. Many examiners are full-time teachers as well, but they are not allowed to have any links to the school for which they mark exam papers. So there is absolutely no chance that you will know the person who eventually marks your exam paper.

» **What about handwriting? Mine gets a bit dodgy when I rush ...**

We try to read what we can, but if we can't understand your handwriting, your mark might be affected. But you should know that we're after good answers, not long ones. It sounds obvious, but good spelling, grammar and punctuation will also improve your chances of getting a higher grade – marks depend on them.

Around 55,000 examiners are needed to mark 26 million exam scripts and pieces of coursework submitted by students each year





you've got your results. what next?

If you have been successful in your application to university, you will have accepted an offer on either a 'conditional' or 'unconditional' basis. If you have offers, your next step depends upon your position in UCAS.

Check your position on ucastrack on the UCAS website, www.ucas.com, using your application number and password that were given to you in your acknowledgement letter earlier in the year. If you've forgotten your number or password, the UCAS telephone helpline will be able to give you the details. The website will be available on results day.

If you have conditional offers, check your results.

» **If you meet the conditions of the offer**, you are guaranteed a place. You need do nothing more. Your university or college will automatically confirm your place. UCAS will send you a confirmation letter with a reply slip. You need to send the reply slip to your university or college within 14 days.

» **If you do not meet the conditions of the offer**, your university or college may still accept you. Check your position on ucastrack. If you have been accepted, you do not need to do anything. Wait for a letter from UCAS. However, if you have been turned down, you automatically become eligible for UCAS Clearing (see opposite). If there is no decision, it could be worth ringing your university or college.

If you do not have offers (or fail to meet the conditions of your offers) you automatically become eligible for UCAS Clearing. UCAS will send all eligible applicants a Clearing Entry Form (CEF) as soon as A level results are available. You will need to send off this form if you are offered a place. You can search for course vacancies in *The Independent* and *Scotsman* newspapers and on the UCAS website at www.ucas.com. You need to telephone universities or colleges direct to try to gain a place, which will then be ratified through the clearing process.

move on

