

# Qualifications Reform

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**Title:** University of Southampton statement on qualifications reform

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**Date:** March 2015

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a. Background

Commencing in September 2015, newly reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications will be introduced in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Not all subjects will be reformed at the same time with the reforms taking around three years to be rolled out to all subjects. The reforms will vary between the three nations of the UK which use these qualifications (there is a different qualification system in use in Scotland).

We are very aware that the substantial nature of these reforms has created some uncertainty relating to the selection and admission of candidates for Higher Education. We hope that this statement will provide future applicants, their advisors, and schools and colleges, with reassurance as to how the University of Southampton will approach the new and reformed qualifications, and also those candidates who will be taking a mixture of reformed and unreformed subjects over the next few years.

The University is very grateful to Ann Johnson (Brockenhurst College) and Judy Miles (Bournemouth School for Girls) who kindly advised the University as it reviewed the reforms.

b. Southampton's fair admissions policy

The University of Southampton is committed to operating a [fair admissions policy](#). We aim to attract the most talented students, irrespective of background, who we believe have the potential and motivation to succeed on our programmes and become confident citizens and potential leaders in an increasingly globalised work environment. This commitment has been at the fore as we have considered our response to these reforms and we are determined to ensure that no applicant is at a disadvantage as a result of them.

c. Subject choice at GCSE, AS and A level

With the introduction of the reformed qualifications being staggered over a number years, we are concerned that the reforms themselves do not become a factor as to which subjects students may choose to take. We would refer those considering applying to Higher Education to the Russell Group publication "[Informed Choices](#)" along with a range of prospectuses in order to understand better which subjects are needed, or are desirable, for given degree courses.

d. AS and A levels

Schools and colleges within the maintained sector are currently required to include AS level grades on UCAS forms, whereas those in the independent sector may choose whether or not to do so. It is therefore the case that the University already sees AS grades for some applicants and not for others.

The reforms in England (but not in Northern Ireland or Wales) will establish a 'linear' two-year A level. This will give schools and colleges in England a range of choices with regard to entering students for the AS level examination or not. There will be no advantage or disadvantage given to applicants to the University of Southampton from either approach, or from a combined approach as the different subjects are reformed over successive years. We do appreciate that a positive set of grades at AS level can be motivational to students and may support teachers in more accurately determining predicted grades.

Where AS level results are not available, we will welcome references from teachers which refer to the results of 'mock' examinations or other school assessments.

We are strongly of the view that each school and college should make the appropriate policy decision to suit its unique circumstances. We would ask schools and colleges briefly to confirm its policy and adopted model in this respect on the UCAS form.

All of our programmes other than Medicine express their entry criteria in terms of three subjects offered at A level and selection decisions are informed, in part, by actual or predicted grades in those subjects (normally excluding General Studies, Use of Mathematics, and Critical Thinking). We do not anticipate this approach changing. The University welcomes applicants additionally offering the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) which is discussed in greater detail in section g, below. The University does not currently anticipate introducing any additional entrance tests as a result of these reforms.

In the case of Medicine where three A levels and an additional AS level subject (or the EPQ) is currently required, from entry in September 2017 the requirement for the additional AS level subject will be removed so as not to put in place a barrier to those applicants who were not able to sit the AS level examination. However, the Faculty of Medicine will retain its strong support for the EPQ which it believes helps to prepare students for the independent style of learning required in order to succeed at Medical School. The Faculty encourages potential applicants to consider taking the EPQ where it is offered at their school or college. However, the Faculty appreciates that the qualification is not available universally and will ensure candidates whose school/college does not offer it will not be disadvantaged in the selection process.

e. Practical skills in Science

In England (but again, not in Northern Ireland and Wales) the reformed A levels in Biology, Chemistry and Physics will assess practical skills separately to the grading of the written examination. The practical skills will be assessed on a pass/fail basis, whilst the written examination will be assessed using grades of A\* to E.

The University of Southampton believes that practical skills in the sciences are integral to a candidate's understanding and appreciation of these subjects and it will require all applicants offering one or more of these subjects at A level to pass the practical skills assessment in addition to achieving the required grade(s) in the written examination(s). We believe this approach further highlights our commitment to fairness as we will be asking English students to demonstrate the same level and breadth of knowledge as those from Northern Ireland and Wales (for whom the practical skills assessment will remain an integral element of their overall grade).

f. Typical entry requirements

Other than where changes are indicated in this statement, the University is not planning to change its typical entry requirements as a result of these reforms. However, we will monitor the performance of students as the reforms proceed and where necessary will respond to developing trends.

g. Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)

The University of Southampton was the first to introduce an alternative offer scheme for applicants additionally taking the EPQ. Under this scheme, eligible applicants to subjects across our humanities, business, law, social sciences and related programmes may receive two offers – our usual offer plus an offer of an A in the EPQ and one grade lower in their A level subjects (e.g. AAA at A level; or AAB at A level AND an A grade in EPQ).

The University will continue this scheme and remains fully committed in its support for the EPQ which it believes helps to prepare students for the style of learning found in many subjects at degree level.

h. Welsh Baccalaureate

The original Welsh Baccalaureate qualification incorporated a core component that was assessed on a pass/fail basis. From first teaching in September 2013, a revised core component was introduced utilising a grading structure with more points on the scale.

From September 2015, a revised Welsh Baccalaureate will be introduced with the core component replaced by the Skills Challenge Certificate incorporating a substantial individual project and three challenges. The Certificate will be graded using the same grades as A levels.

The University welcomes the changes being made to the Welsh Baccalaureate and will continue to recognise the qualification. In many subjects, Welsh applicants will be expected to offer at least two A levels alongside the Skills Challenge Certificate, all at suitable grades. For some programmes, often where a need for prerequisite subject knowledge must be demonstrated, Welsh applicants will be expected to offer three A levels of the appropriate grades and offers would not normally then additionally make reference to the Skills Challenge Certificate. The University intends to ensure that its programme requirements relating to this qualification are reviewed to make this transparent.

i. GCSE

As with AS and A level reform, the changes at GCSE level will differ between England, Northern Ireland and Wales. One of the more significant changes in England will be for the reformed GCSEs to be graded numerically (Northern Ireland and Wales will retain their existing grading structures). The new grades will be from 1 (the lowest grade) to 9 (the highest grade). Ofqual has stated that a grade of 4 will equate with the existing C grade as it intends to give further differentiation at the upper end of the ability range.

The University of Southampton will thus require all applicants to achieve at least a grade 4 in English and Mathematics GCSEs (taken in England) or a grade C in both subjects (where taken in Northern Ireland or Wales).

Some degree subjects stipulate specific additional GCSE minimum grades (eg. Medicine and some programmes within the Southampton Business School) and the University will review its requirements in respect of these in due course, again ensuring that a fair requirement is set for the three nations of the UK using the GCSE qualification.

There will be no requirement for students in England to offer the 'EBacc'.

j. Core Mathematics

In England, a new 'Core Mathematics' qualification is being introduced with the intention of increasing the number of young people who study mathematics beyond GCSE having achieved at least a grade C at that level. The University fully supports the principles behind the introduction of the new Core Mathematics qualifications and believes they could be beneficial to students considering making an application to a range of degree subjects in the social sciences, business, and health sciences, for example. However, the University does not intend, at this time, to set an expectation that such applicants must offer this new qualification nor for Core Mathematics to be a substitute for where A level Mathematics is specified in an offer.

k. Tech level qualifications

Tech levels are new vocational qualifications being introduced in England from September 2015. Tech levels will be the size of two A levels and when combined with a level 3 mathematics qualification (eg. A level Mathematics) and the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) will count towards the TechBacc performance measure.

The University is currently evaluating the new Tech level qualifications and will update its guidance shortly.

l. Further clarification or change

This statement was approved by Recruitment and Admissions Subcommittee on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2015 and was based on the information available to the University at that time. Should the guidance issued by regulatory and/or awarding bodies or other relevant organisations change or be updated, the University will review its guidance in the light of those changes and as such it reserves the right to amend and/or withdraw some or all of this guidance. Enquiries should, in the first instance, be directed to [admissions@soton.ac.uk](mailto:admissions@soton.ac.uk).