

## Sixth Form Curriculum from September 2015

All A Level qualifications are being changed at a national level. The AS qualification, which used to comprise 50% of the complete A Level, is being decoupled from A Level. This means that, whilst AS qualifications will still exist, they will not contribute to the overall A Level any more - they will be completely stand alone qualifications. The new A Levels will be linear courses, which means that exams for them will all be at the end of a two year course.

This change is not all happening at once. Subjects are being moved to this linear model over a period of 3 years, according to the schedule below, so there will be a mix of old and new for a while. All subjects will be following the new linear syllabuses by 2017

- 2015: Art, English, Economics, Business, History, Psychology, Biology, Chemistry, Physics
- 2016: Geography, Theatre Studies, DT, French, German, Spanish, Music, Latin, Greek, RS
- 2017: Ancient History, Politics, Maths, Philosophy

Abingdon has chosen to move to an entirely linear approach for its Sixth Form from September 2015, regardless of whether a subject is 'reformed' or 'unreformed'. Thus boys will choose 4 subjects to pursue in the Lower Sixth until at least the summer of L6th. They will then decide whether to drop a subject for U6th and take 3 or 4 subjects through to A Level in U6th. We will not be offering the stand-alone AS qualifications.

We are tremendously excited by the opportunities this has offered us to rethink our Sixth Form curriculum. We carefully considered all the possible models over a number of months and consulted with schools that are similar to us in terms of academic strength and size. We are certain that the route we are choosing gives Abingdonians the best of all worlds - a breadth of rigorous academic study within a framework that has been freed from the limiting nature of the bite-sized, modular system we have been operating under for over a decade. Once again, Sixth Form pupils will have the space and time to explore their subjects properly without the spectre of an exam coming at them over the horizon almost as soon as they've started, which has been forcing them to stop exploring their subjects creatively and to start worrying about exam technique at far too early a stage. It is the triumph of 'education' over 'exams'.

Our proposal has been unanimously approved at all levels of committee within Abingdon, starting with debate by Heads of Department in Summer 2014 who then made a recommendation to the Senior Leadership Team in September. The proposal was discussed at the Governors' Education Committee in November and given final ratification by the Full Governing Body in December.

### Q&A

#### **1. Why has Abingdon chosen to go completely linear now with all courses rather than just the reformed ones?**

We are keen to reap the benefits that will flow from being released from the shackles of AS exams at the end of the Lower Sixth which have meant needing to focus on exam requirements from an early stage in the Sixth Form and a consequent loss of teaching and learning time. We can now be more creative in our curriculum planning by, for example, bringing harder/more interesting work into the Lower Sixth, having the freedom to cover off-syllabus topics, having more teaching time (with no study leave in the Lower Sixth, the summer term will be about teaching and learning, not exam technique) and giving boys more time to realise that they need to change their choice of subjects or to realise what they want to study at university level. By avoiding the messy mixed economy of some subjects sitting 'old style' AS exams alongside the new linear courses in the Lower Sixth, there is a clarity to our provision and an overall integrity to what we are offering the boys.

#### **2. Why not sit AS exams in the new 'reformed' subjects anyway given there still is an AS qualification?**

We feel that pursuing AS exams that do not contribute to the overall A Level grade would result in a wasted opportunity in terms of the creative planning of the curriculum and less of a rounded educational opportunity for the boys. We would have to be planning for the exams from the beginning

of the Lower Sixth and we do not want to have boys and teachers constrained by the strictures of exams so soon into their A Level study, especially as the qualification would not count towards their A Level any more. There is much more to be gained from our designing courses that have challenge, rigour and interest but at the same time no immediate focus on the much less 'educational' things such as examination criteria and techniques. These have their place, but not until the Upper Sixth, in our opinion.

**3. So, boys may well study a subject for a year but have no qualification to show for it at the end of that period?**

Yes, this will be true for some boys. However, it is our opinion that boys don't need to have a piece of paper to tell them that their study has been valuable. It has long been part of Abingdon's philosophy that we don't confuse 'education' with 'exams'. The boys will still have given themselves the experience and breadth that pursuing a subject beyond GCSE will bring and that is the key thing. Motivation will not be an issue because boys will not know which subject, if any, they'll be dropping until after the summer exam in the Lower Sixth so any of the courses they follow in the Lower Sixth will need to be treated as if they were going to be followed through to A Level - they will certainly be taught like that. In our experience, the subject boys pick at their '4th' when in 5th year often turns out to rank more highly with them when they've experienced it at A Level, so boys have always been encouraged to place equal weight on each subject. One benefit of what we're doing is that, if a subject doesn't work out for a boy and he does not achieve as highly as he wanted in it, that fact does not have to appear on a UCAS form. Any public exam result (e.g. an AS) would, however, have to appear on the UCAS form, whatever its quality (see Q4).

**4. Why not sit the new AS in the 'dropped' subject at least?**

Though the new AS qualifications will have plenty of common ground with the full two-year A Level course, our creative approach to linearity will mean that we're not necessarily teaching the "AS" component of a course at the time that would be needed to prepare boys properly for the AS exam in the L6th. Besides, boys will not decide whether to drop a subject or not until the summer of the L6th. Heading them towards an AS in their 'dropped' subject in the L6th would mean having them decide on which subject to drop a lot earlier in the year - too early in our opinion. Additionally, any particular class will have a mix of those who will drop it and those who will carry on with it but always those carrying on will outnumber those dropping - it would not make sense to skew our curriculum towards the minority in this way. Again, we are wanting to avoid the excessive exam focus that has been a feature of the UK system since 2002 - we want boys to have some space to learn, develop and contemplate. It is also worth noting that universities will expect AS grades to be recorded on UCAS forms where boys have done them - but it's likely that the dropped subject is going to be a boy's weakest one and it's not sensible to have that as the only piece of academic data that universities see from a boy's L6th year.

**5. OK, so AS exams in 'reformed' subjects don't count towards A Level but what about AS exams in the yet to be reformed subjects? Will my son be denied his chance of taking AS twice which current Sixth Formers have been given?**

It is true that we will be restricting the opportunity for boys to resit AS exams in the unreformed subjects. However, this has been true of Abingdon in the past - when a January resit window used to be available, we always limited Abingtonians to just 4 units where other schools allowed pupils to resit as many units as they liked. Some schools even had an exam session in the January of the Lower Sixth. Our experience at Abingdon is that boys have overwhelmingly performed far better on AS units when they sit them at the end of the Upper Sixth as compared with sitting them in the Lower Sixth, usually thanks to their advanced maturity and experience. And, of course, our results at A Level have been consistently strong for many years. We don't regard our new plan as having much risk in it.

**6. Aren't you doing anything to mitigate that risk though, however small you think it is?**

Yes we are. Some unreformed subjects will be allowed to take one of their two AS units in the L6th: in Geography, Latin, Greek, RS and Philosophy. This is to prevent things like excessive build up of set texts, making the workload of boys in the Upper Sixth more manageable. If things in an AS unit don't go as well as hoped, it can be resat in the Upper Sixth. The new courses are designed to be linear, so it's a problem that will go away as subjects are reformed. Unreformed subjects with coursework (e.g. DT, Music) will still be able to complete that coursework in the Lower Sixth.

**7. What about subjects that you do jointly with St Helen's?**

St Helen's have not opted to take the linear approach that we have, so we have agreed that Politics and Theatre Studies will continue to operate in the current manner - i.e. a complete AS in the Lower Sixth. This will affect relatively few Abingdonians.

**8. Is it your expectation that boys will study four A Levels and that dropping a subject between Lower and Upper Sixth will be unusual?**

We will have to wait and see, but our suspicion is that things will pretty much follow the same pattern as currently, which is that the majority of boys will drop a subject. We recognise, though, that there may be some benign pressure on them to continue with all four in order to get the certificate at the end for all of them. It certainly may mean that some of them keep on with all four for longer, perhaps until Christmas of the Upper Sixth. However, with universities making it clear that they are still looking for three A Levels, lots of boys will want to concentrate just on three, especially once university offers have started to come through. We will continue to let boys choose for themselves, having taken advice from their teachers, tutors and housemasters; they will certainly be able to continue with all four if they wish.

**9. Speaking of universities, what is their view of the new system? How will they react to Abingdon not doing AS exams?**

They are (mostly) taking a very sensible line in our opinion. They want to make offers on 3 A Levels (or equivalent) and are confident they will be able to identify best candidates without AS grades, basing their judgments on GCSEs, grade predictions, the UCAS personal statement and the school's academic reference that talks about achievement and potential. They will know the School's context and we will be explicit in our references that the absence of AS results is part of a school policy. We will certainly not be alone in choosing this route for Abingdon and indeed there are highly successful schools who avoided the modularity of the previous system altogether anyway. However, universities also say that if you do sit a complete AS, you must declare it on your UCAS form, whatever its quality, which would not of course necessarily be to a boy's advantage.

It seems ironic to us that some universities who have attempted to persuade schools to keep the AS exam are the very places who have long been decrying the erosion of depth in academic understanding, which a fragmented, modular approach to learning has encouraged. They have also worried about students' ability to organise their time and to study independently, identifying modular A-levels as overly bite-sized and examination focused.

One thing all universities identify as desirable is breadth of study (e.g. a 4th subject) even if it hasn't been taken to A or AS Level. Abingdon will be providing that breadth, even if it doesn't result in a qualification. Another way of encouraging breadth is the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), a qualification we will be offering the Lower Sixth alongside their A Levels, and one which universities have consistently made clear they strongly value.

**10. EPQ? What's that then?**

The Extended Project Qualification is now well established as a respected qualification that carries UCAS points. In brief, it's an independent research project – the boys choose what they want to study, though their topic must not cross over with A Level course content. We teach them some methodology – how to research, do citations, construct a bibliography etc – and then they have a supervisor who coaches them but does not 'teach' them as such. They will opt for it in the January of Lower Sixth, the summer is the main research and writing period and in the Michaelmas Term of their Upper Sixth they have to present their work. Universities recognise the hugely valuable independent research skills this teaches children and, though the EPQ is unlikely to form part of a grade offer, it may well cause universities to look favourably on an application. Abingdon is piloting the EPQ with the current Lower Sixth for the 2015 calendar year and expects to launch it as a full initiative in 2016 for next year's Lower Sixth.

**11. Without the mid-point of AS results in the Lower Sixth, how will you make sure that you, the boys and parents know how well a boy is doing?**

Obviously each department and its subject teachers will have their own on-going assessment arrangements during term time and will let parents know formally the state of play via the School's reporting system. Above that, there will be school-wide examination points. First there will be a "Test Week" just after the Michaelmas half term in the Lower Sixth, used to diagnose problems and perhaps to provide evidence that a boy needs to consider another A Level option. Then there will be a formal end of year exam in the Summer of the Lower Sixth which will have the status in our minds of the

current AS exams and will be taken as seriously when it comes to identifying whether or not a boy should continue with a subject to the full A Level as well as offering a tentative prediction of likely A Level grade. In the Upper Sixth there will be mock exams in the Lent Term, giving a realistic sense of likely grades in the summer whilst leaving enough time for final advice to be taken on board.

**12. With all this change going on, have you considered the alternatives to A Level again?**

We looked at IB a few years ago as a potential joint venture with St Helen's but decided against it. Nothing has changed on this. However, the move to linearity has made Cambridge's pre-U courses more viable for us and one department - Modern Languages - will be moving to it from this September.

**13. Pre-U? What on earth is that?**

It's an alternative to A levels but can be sat alongside them (i.e. boys can do some pre-U and some A Levels). It's graded differently, but it's well established and universities understand its value (in fact the top pre-U grade - D1 - is rated above the A\* at A Level). We always seek to choose the best courses for our boys, prioritising challenge and interest as well as thinking about usefulness as university preparation. Abingdon's MFL department, having looked at new the A Level proposals, has decided that the pre-U fits our criteria best. We are strengthened in our view by contacts we have with other pre-U schools (such as Eton, Charterhouse, Winchester, Oundle and Marlborough).

**14. What other things can a boy in Abingdon's Sixth Form be doing to become rounded and keep himself stretched academically?**

In short, a huge amount. Firstly, we have the compulsory General Studies Core Skills in the Lower Sixth (joint with St Helen's). This covers Critical Thinking and Theory of Knowledge in Michaelmas and then moves onto various practical elements, such as writing letters of application and interview skills. In the Upper Sixth there is the 'roundabout' for all that covers some 'key' things (e.g. managing finances, research skills, health) and then the 'for interest' option courses (e.g. masterpieces of western music, cooking, sign language, learning bridge, etiquette, Arabic).

Within subject areas there are Olympiads, challenge competitions and scholarships to bid for, alongside performance opportunities if Music or Drama are your thing. There are plenty of trips and visits to satisfy further interest as well as clubs and societies that offer a variety of lectures and seminars to advance knowledge and challenge thinking. Many subjects also produce magazines written and edited by boys, such as Words & That, The Martlet, and Griffenonomics. Additionally, if boys don't want to submit to the rigour of the EPQ, we will continue with our home grown versions: the Green Abingdon Project and our internal extended essay.

**15. Isn't it the case that Tristram Hunt has said that, in the event of a Labour victory in the upcoming General Election, Labour will immediately reverse the A Level reforms and recouple AS and A2 exams? What will Abingdon do if that happens?**

It's true that he said this back in August 2014, but we wait to see if it makes it as far as becoming a manifesto promise. We think that it's actually pretty unlikely that Labour would be able to make this reversal anyway in the time between coming to power and the new courses starting, which would be a matter of only a few months. Much careful planning has gone on in schools over a number of months since the reforms were announced and it would not be reasonable for any administration to expect schools to recast their planning in such a short span of time, let alone the exam boards, who would have to rethink and republish their new course specifications in an absurdly short period of time. That said, if it were to come to pass despite protestations, Abingdon already has a plan B, given we've been successfully running a 'coupled' AS and A2 system for years. We have simply preferred to plan for the new system with a sense of opportunity and optimism, given what opportunities it offers to create an innovative and improved Sixth Form curriculum. We live in the hope that, whoever gets in on May 7, education won't continue to be the political football that successive governments have treated it as being. All schools in the UK could do with a sustained period of stability and continuity after the series of major changes that have been encountered over the past fifteen years.