



The structure of AS and A level courses

A and AS level courses are described as level 3 qualifications which means that students will have already gained 5 A* - C GCSE grades (or equivalent) and will be progressing from level 2.

Syllabuses for the majority of AS and A level courses were revised in September 2008. The first cohort of students to study the new syllabuses will complete their A levels in the summer of 2010. The new A levels are designed to be more stretching and challenging.

AS is the first year of an A level and consists of 2 or 3 units (depending on the subject). Each unit is given a mark which is converted into a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS¹) and a grade A - E or U (unclassified). The total UMS for the AS units is then converted into a grade for the AS qualification. It is a qualification in its own right. Grades A - E are pass grades.

A2 is the second year of A level, and also consists of 2 or 3 units (depending on the subject). The marking processes follow the same approach as that of AS units described above – with the use of UMS.

Units in all subjects are examined/assessed in May/June. In many subjects exams/assessments can also be done in January. Students have the option to improve performance by re-sitting units. AS and A2 marks added together give the overall A level mark, with the AS units contributing 50% of the A level marks. A level pass grades range from A* to E.

A* is a new grade which is awarded to those students who achieve a grade A overall at A level, and also achieve at least 90% across their A2 units.

17 March 2010

¹ Uniform Mark Scale

In non-unitised specifications, candidates take all papers in the same exam series. After scaling the raw marks to comply with paper weightings, candidates' marks are added to give a total mark for the exam as a whole. Using the grade boundaries set by the awarding committee, subject grades are then allocated.

Modular specifications (with units), on the other hand, allow candidates to take the module/unit exams in different series. Papers for a particular unit may vary slightly in levels of difficulty. A mark of 45 in January 2009, for example, may represent the same level of achievement as a mark of 48 in summer 2009. Some method must therefore be found to put the marks from different series on a common, or uniform scale so that both 45 (from January) and 48 (from the summer) have the same value when contributing to an overall grade. The converted marks are marks on the uniform mark scale.