

News

A-LEVELS

Boards draft harder exams

Julie Nightingale
makethegrade@redactive.co.uk

Schools have had their first taste of what the new, tougher A-levels papers will contain with the issue of draft questions by exam boards.

Under the Stretch and Challenge initiative, A2 papers from 2010 will feature more open-ended questions designed to test students' abilities to analyse and evaluate and, in some subjects, to draw on a wider range of sources for their answers.

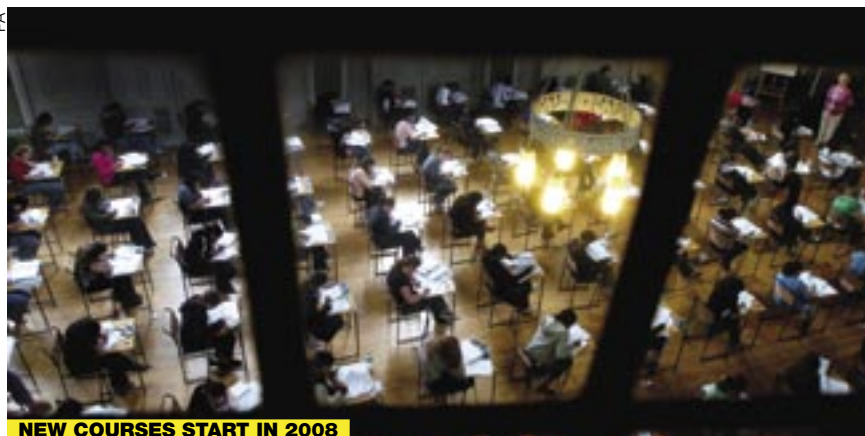
The aim is to differentiate between students who achieve an A grade and the new A* grade, but the changes are also intended to bring added depth to A-level studies for all students.

The number of course units is also being reduced from six to four in most subjects.

The government ordered boards to take a new approach two years ago in order to head off critics who claim the exams have become intellectually less rigorous in the past two decades.

In 2006 the pass rate rose for the 24th year in a row and around 25 per cent of candidates were awarded an A grade.

The revised A-levels will be taught from 2008 but some in education fear that the



NEW COURSES START IN 2008

timetable for implementation has been rushed. There has also been speculation that the changes will result in a shortage of assessors as the new papers will take longer to mark.

Mike Cresswell, director-general of the AQA exam board, did not foresee difficulties. Staff would need to be trained to assess the new question style, he said, but most examiners would be teachers and already familiar with the new subject matter.

More time would need to be spent initially

on standardising assessment processes, but the extra time would be offset by the reduction in the number of units taught.

"For that reason, we do not anticipate any recruitment problems," he said.

● **For more on the new A-levels from the three major examining bodies see:**

AQA – www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gce.php

OCR – www.ocr.org.uk/14-19/14-19_alevel.html

Edexcel – www.edexcel.org.uk/quals

DEVELOPMENT

Emotions 'potential threat'

The emphasis on tending to young people's emotional needs is undermining their ability to fulfil their potential, according to a new book by two leading figures in higher education and assessment.

The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education argues that too much attention is paid to dealing with students' emotional wellbeing at the expense of rigorous educational assessment.

Authors Kathryn Ecclestone (above), the new professor of



JIM VARNEY
ECCLESTONE: INTERVENTIONS

post-compulsory education at Oxford Brookes University, and Dennis Hayes, head of the Centre for Professional Learning at Canterbury Christ Church University, say this results in a failure to challenge

and stretch students to realise their potential.

Ecclestone, who worked with the young unemployed in the 1970s and 1980s before becoming an academic, says there has been a huge rise in interventions into children's

and young people's emotions via education.

"In the book we call these 'therapeutic interventions', because they are rooted in crude ideas about trauma in childhood or stress translated into counselling approaches," she says.

"I was trained in those counselling approaches myself, so I know they have a value, but there's a rapidly growing obsession with this emotional vulnerability [in education]. I'm interested in what that's going to mean for assessment."

Current government policy

encourages teachers to regard learners as fragile and unable to rise to the challenge of learning, she adds, in the belief that people can't learn if they are handicapped by emotional baggage.

"It's almost as if we're more worried about diagnosing self-esteem and levels of emotional wellbeing – and there's a massive rise in assessment instruments to do that – before attending to subject learning."

● *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* is published by Routledge this year.

● **See feature, page 24**

ROYAL CHARTER

Knight backs charter for IEA



JIM KNIGHT: BEHIND SPONSORSHIP

Stephanie Sparrow

makethegrade@redactive.co.uk

The IEA is one step closer to its goal of offering chartered status after winning the support of Jim Knight, the schools minister.

Knight has agreed to recommend to Alan Johnson, secretary of state for education, that the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) sponsors the IEA's petition for a Royal Charter with Privy Council.

Once the DfES has formally agreed to sponsor the IEA's petition, the institute will petition Privy Council for a Royal Charter to enable it to provide the designation of Chartered Educational Assessor to qualifying members.

Before this can happen, the DfES will consult various educational stakeholders over its plans to sponsor the IEA's petition. When the consultations have concluded, a formal petition will be presented to Privy

Council so that the institute might be awarded a Royal Charter by the autumn.

The charter would enable the IEA to offer chartered status to qualifying individuals who can demonstrate competency in educational assessment as well as a commitment to continuing professional development.

This would put the IEA in position to pilot the role of a schools-based specialist in assessment practice, aligned to the IEA Professional Framework, who could support their colleagues in order to quality assure assessment practice in schools, thereby aligning internal assessment standards with external national standards.

The purpose of this proposed role is to help develop assessment capability and capacity in schools in order to provide a platform from which to deliver effective education reform in areas such as Progress Tests and internal assessment relating to the new specialised Diplomas, in support of the main awarding bodies.

For qualifying members, a Royal Charter would put them on a par with other professions such as accountants.

By developing skills in assessment and capability in good practice, individuals who hold this designation will be seen as effective in promoting high standards of assessment practice in schools, colleges and the workplace. The institute hopes this will enable potential employers to identify their skills in assessment.

CHARTERED ASSESSORS

Autumn launch for high-level pilot

The move to create chartered educational assessors takes a further step forward later this year with the launch in autumn of a pilot scheme for assessors working at the highest level.

Under the two-part process candidates will use a self-assessment tool to determine their existing level of skill and experience.

It will indicate whether they need more training or experience or whether they are sufficiently qualified to go forward to apply for chartered status.

With the latter, they will join a programme involving a combination of face-to-face training and electronic materials.

Initially, up to 50 high-level assessors – principal and senior examiners and local authority assessment co-ordinators – will be invited to join the trial, which is set to run until December.

Details will be posted on the IEA website (www.ioea.org.uk) as soon as they are available.

More entrants applying to take applied subjects

Entries for applied subjects look set to rise this year as more students opt for vocationally oriented syllabus.

"What's becoming apparent is that the numbers for the applied GCE [A-level] are increasing quite considerably," said Pauline Sparkes, head of awarding body performance at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

The removal of the Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) after January has probably contributed to the rise, as more students are choosing applied subjects who would previously have opted for the VCE post-16.

As their title suggests, applied subjects place emphasis on the application of knowledge and skills at work.

Other early trends to emerge include a rise in GCSE science entries on the back of the new specifications being offered by some awarding bodies.

WORKPLACE SKILLS

They're learning it

McDonald's is hoping to revise the image of its workforce as an army of unskilled burger flippers with a new web-based learning system for its staff.

The company is offering NVQ level 1 and 2 courses under the Move On At Work programme, an online numeracy and literacy training scheme created by training specialists CTAD, part of Tribal Education, and run in partnership with the Learning and Skills Council.

Employees sign up via the McDonald's intranet and their literacy and numeracy

skills are assessed to produce an individual learning plan which they follow under the guidance of an online tutor. Final exams are administered by OCR.

David Fairhurst, a McDonald's UK senior vice-president, said the programme brought a new convenience to learning.

"It's well recognised that there's an issue with basic skills in this country," he added.

"Giving employees the opportunity to take qualifications in literacy and numeracy is something we saw as useful and innovative."



INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLANS FOR STAFF

INTERNATIONAL

Taking the word overseas



The IEA will be exhibiting for the first time in Azerbaijan later this year when it attends the International Association for Educational Assessment conference in the capital, Baku (left).

"Our aim is to raise the profile of the institute across Europe," said Graham Herbert, project manager for the National Assessment Agency.

"We will be hoping to identify international contacts for future expansion of the institute, develop links with the international community and gain insight into assessment from leading lights across Europe."

The institute has also been approached to take its expertise to the Middle East as part of a drive by Dubai (top right) and



other Gulf states to strengthen assessment in vocational qualifications.

The technical skills of domestic workers in the Middle East are underdeveloped and countries rely heavily on an imported workforce.

"To maintain economic growth, countries in the region recognise that they will need to develop their own skills base," said Herbert.

"One way to do that is through improved vocational qualifications with rigorous assessment systems and they have contacted us with a view to offering them guidance."

● The IEA conference takes place on 16-21 September. For more information, visit www.iaea.info

Have SATs reached the end of the road?



TESTING, TESTING: KEN BOSTON

Ken Boston, chief executive of the QCA, has suggested that National Curriculum Tests (SATs) for seven, 11 and 14-year-olds could be replaced by "sample testing" of some children. Meanwhile the Department for Education and Skills is looking at introducing "just in time" testing. So have SATs as we know them come to the end of the road? And would a move towards greater use of teacher assessment be welcomed?

Robin Hughes, a curriculum development adviser for Essex County Council, said that tests only give a snapshot of the pupils' ability on that test on that day – "they may tell you more about their blood sugar levels than their skill in a subject".

Teachers need to be doing their own assessments compiled from different sources of evidence, including test results, he said.

Geoff White, an examiner and coursework assessor, said most teachers probably feel that pupils are tested too much already and would welcome a more flexible approach that teacher assessment would bring.

"It might be possible to have an end of Key Stage 3 test that reflected what teachers had actually taught, perhaps a bit like the old mode 3 CSEs."

On the other hand, teacher assessments would have to be marked by teachers themselves with, perhaps, some form of external moderation: "There could well be a role for chartered educational assessors here."

Charles Smith, a principal examiner in economics, said: "For teacher assessment and other initiatives such as 'just in time' testing to be workable and to enjoy public confidence, we must be far clearer as to what the purposes of tests are. As long as league tables are used to assess the success of schools, and as long as tests are used to construct league tables, then there will always be a fundamental suspicion of tests administered by teachers and a fundamental conflict with the idea of the teacher as an assessment professional."

CORBIS