

## The Gold Standard – the A Level: the British post-16 qualification

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The Gold Standard was the ‘promise to pay the bearer’ of a banknote ‘on demand’ the amount in actual gold. Long after people were prevented from being able to turn up at the national bank and ‘demand’ their gold, the term itself has come to mean a thing of superior quality.

Just after World War II and a few years after the actual Gold Standard was abandoned, the British post-16 qualification, the A Level, was introduced. Its quality, combining breadth and depth, its flexibility and its portability has led it to weathering nearly 70 years of service. It has survived political and cultural upheaval in its home country, where it has been fiercely defended by the public and media and even cost a few Education Secretaries their jobs over the years when they tried to tamper with it. But for many, the A Level has now become the shorthand for a suite of pre-university examinations that demonstrate that a student is ready to enter an Anglo-sphere, high-quality and global higher-education college. It is the litmus-test of such students; it is the Gold Standard of qualifications.

Why has A level achieved this accolade? Well, as well as being a resilient, tried-and-tested qualification with year-on-year comparability, independent and robust adjudication and grade-awarding, it is also surprisingly adaptable for a seven-decade old examination and can be easily personalised to each candidate. Students follow at least three and up to five A Level courses as part of their post-16 studies. Some choose to sit examinations at the end of the two-year course – known in the British system as Years 12 and 13 or historically as lower and upper Sixth Form years. Others decide to sit additional examinations and thereby gain a provisional qualification – the AS Level – at the end of their first year, so that they can assess progress in the course and make applications to universities with ‘real’ rather than predicted examination results.

But the great benefit of the A Level is that every student can choose what they want to do. There are no restrictions imposed by the awarding-bodies on compulsory courses nor on the make-up of the course choices. No combination of courses is forbidden and there are none that you have to do to secure qualification.

Certainly, it is wise for students to make decisions based on future university and career destinations, where there may be requirements for certain courses (and even certain grades in examination results), but this is not primary motivation of the choice of subjects that students make at 16-years-old. Students can make decisions based on what they think that they might do and although the British-system does narrow choices at 16, it also leaves them open for those who choose what might be termed a varied selection of courses to also make those decisions later.

Those that want to work in popular and ultra-competitive fields such as medicine or veterinary science might have to choose chemistry, physics, biology and maths and/or further maths, but those that are not aiming for such fields are not constrained by having to study a language, a science or maths. And with a 70-year record, every higher education provider in the world knows what they are getting from A Level. Someone getting an A-grade today in Subang Jaya, Malaysia is guaranteed to be treated in the same way as somebody who achieved such a grade in Cambridge, England, twenty years ago.

There is so much more to a British-style education than qualifications. The British system wants to develop whole people, who are rounded and have a variety of interests. Qualifications will get you to the interview, but your character will get you the job. Although, the A Level does not have the wrap-around ‘accreditation’ of other post-16 qualification for learning ‘extras’, its simplicity allows students to find their own way and the best schools support



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students in making the right choice of co-curricular activities to provide good CV material and more importantly great experiences of leadership and participation that develop the characteristics of resilience, aspiration and understanding. Lessons tend to be an hour a day in each subject and therefore with a programme of three or four subjects, there is often an hour a day set aside for study and a further one for personal development.

So, as one of the oldest qualifications in the world and with over a million people sitting its examinations each year, the popularity of A Level cannot be questioned. And whilst some other younger post-16 qualifications may provide the glitter, it is the A Level – a widely accepted currency for the international student – that remains golden.