The MA's response to The Advanced British Standard consultation - March 2024

Chapter 1

We propose several overarching aims and principles that should underpin the introduction and design of the Advanced British Standard. To what extent do you support these proposed aims and principles? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Neither support nor oppose

The MA welcome the longer-term nature of thinking in the intentions of the Advanced British Standard initiative. To a considerable extent we agree with the overarching aims outlined in the Advanced British Standard document but would suggest that they are already what secondary and further education aspire to achieve.

We are, as yet, not convinced of the necessity of introducing the ABS in the pursuit of those aims. Furthermore we are gravely concerned about the viability of introducing the ABS in light of current severe national challenges both with insufficient post 16 funding and with the retention and recruitment of teachers.

We propose two main programmes at Level 3: Advanced British Standard and Advanced British Standard (occupational). Each will contain a range of separate components to support students. To what extent do you support the proposed design for the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Neither support nor oppose

More detail is needed to fully appreciate the changes suggested.

We propose two main programmes at Level 2: transition and occupational. Each will contain a range of separate components to support students. To what extent do you support the proposed design for the Level 2 programmes? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Neither support nor oppose

More detail is needed about the proposals at level 2.

To what extent do you support the proposal for Level 1 and Entry Level students?

Neither support nor oppose

If you have views or evidence on how students at Level 1 and Entry Level would most benefit from additional teaching hours, please share below.

There is very limited information in the current proposals for Entry Level and Level 1 students. We would welcome much more detail in this regard.

The post 16 offer to those students with Grades 1 to 3 or ungraded at the end of Key Stage 4 already needs attention in our education system. The most recent reforms of Functional Skills served only to render the qualification less accessible for these learners. Viable meaningful qualifications are needed for these learners, whether or not an ABS structure is introduced.

To what extent do you support the proposal for increased teaching time relative to self-directed study? We particularly welcome any evidence of how this is balanced currently.

Neither support nor oppose

Regarding the proposal for increased teaching time relative to self-directed study, the Mathematical Association would like to make three points:

Trying to increase teaching time will be highly problematic, if not impossible, at a time when the vast majority of schools and colleges are facing sustained difficulties in staffing existing courses.

If it could be staffed, a decrease in independent study time might well be helpful for weaker students by providing a greater proportion of focused time. However on the other hand it could be problematic for stronger students capable of the current proportion of self-directed study to support learning from taught lessons. Higher performing students would still need time for independent practice.
A question – would the increase in the amount of time young people would spend with a teacher in 16-19 education be at the expense of independent study or would students be expected to assign more hours per week to their learning overall?

If you have views on the appropriate size of subjects, including whether we should standardise associated hours, please share them below.

We particularly welcome any evidence of guided learning hours delivered currently.
Regarding the appropriate size of subjects, we note that it is envisaged that 'majors' would have between 300 and 350 guided learning hours, in contrast to 360 currently for an A level. If at the lower end of this interval, less content would presumably be covered. Would that leave students less well prepared for their chosen discipline at degree level, contrary to the aim of helping 'more young people gain the right…depth of knowledge by age 19…valued by universities'?
For instance for a Maths degree course a future student of the proposed Mathematics and Further Mathematics 'majors' (600 hours?) would presumably have covered less mathematics at Level 3 - and hence be less well prepared for degree level content - than a current student of Mathematics and Further Mathematics A levels (720 hours).

If you have views on how we can encourage employers to offer industry placements and what further support education providers will require, please share below.
We would envisage considerable practical challenges in trying to ensure that sufficient industry placements are available for students on Occupational ABS pathway. What implications would there be for students if demand did not meet supply when they applied for a course or if a large quantity of placement opportunities in a particular location were withdrawn unexpectedly once students were already on a course? Could their course continue if replacement placements within a reasonable radius could not be found?

A huge amount of money and time has been invested in the introduction of T levels. It would seem a great shame and a waste of valuable resources to abandon these before there has even been the opportunity to embed these changes. Furthermore, the existing design of T levels may already offer more occupational support and teacher input than what is proposed within the Occupational ABS pathway.
Likewise, schools have worked hard to implement the reformed A levels. Again we are not convinced of the necessity or viability of radical change for the academic Level 3 pathway as outlined in the current ABS proposals.

To what extent do you support the proposal for how subjects will be selected to be included in the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes?

Neither support nor oppose

To what extent do you support the proposal for how subjects will be selected to be included in the Level 2 programmes?

Neither support nor oppose

Chapter 2 - Section 3

We propose that we develop the English and maths offer within these reforms around certain principles. To what extent do you support these principles?

Somewhat oppose

To what extent do you support using the proposed knowledge and skills identified for maths and English to inform these components of the Advanced British Standard? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Neither support nor oppose

Regarding the principles for the English and Maths offer in the ABS, we would be concerned that this new requirement of post 16 study in both could be a deterrent and/or a barrier to any learner who has struggled with either subject at GCSE. Would this prevent such learners from being able to pursue an academic route in other subjects.
One such group could be students (some with ASD) who excel in Mathematics and Computer Science but who struggle considerably in English language exams. Would compelling such students to continue to work on English exam courses genuinely enhance the overall skill level of the country, as intended in the Aims and Principles of the ABS, or instead cause distraction and undue stress for such students? Likewise would requiring some students to continue with Maths post 16 be more purposeful than allowing them to specialise in their chosen subjects?
Whilst Mathematics A level and English A level are popular subject choices (with Mathematics A level having percentage of all A levels), a number of Level 3 students currently study neither. In some cases they would not have chosen either subject, let alone both, even if able to choose 5 subjects. As well as presenting enormous challenges in terms of staffing, questions arise as to the impact on students' overall motivation, progress, performance, and well-being of compelling them to pursue both English and Mathematics at a minimum of 'Minor' level.

We propose that there will be a range of English and maths majors and minors at Levels 3. To what extent do you support this proposal?

Somewhat support

How can we best support students who have secured lower Level 2 passes in English and maths at 16 (e.g. grade 4 or 5) to progress onto Level 3 study in these subjects?

Firstly we would query the description of grades 4 or 5 at GCSE being lower Level 2 passes. Grade 4 is commonly described as a 'standard' pass and grade 5 as a 'secure' pass. Surely grades 1 to 3 are the 'lower level passes'?
Secondly grade 4 or grade 5 proficiency in GCSE Mathematics does not provide a viable springboard of skills and knowledge to facilitate progression into Level 3 learning in Mathematics, due to the inherently hierarchical nature of the subject; hence GCSE grade 6 or 7 currently being the minimum entry requirement for most A level courses in Mathematics.

If you have views on how existing Level 2 qualifications (GCSEs and Functional Skills qualifications) could provide the basis for two-year Level 2 study for English and maths within the Advanced British Standard, please share below.

Existing Level 2 Mathematics qualifications (GCSEs and FSQs) would not provide the basis for suitable two-year Level 2 study for Mathematics. We would strongly recommend the creation of relevant, engaging, accessible, applied qualifications different to GCSE resit. Such qualifications would be designed around what would help such students to be successful and readily employable citizens. With or without the introduction of an ABS, this aspect of our education system is in urgent need of attention, not least due to the very low pass rates for GCSE resit students post 16.

Chapter 3

We have proposed assessment principles to underpin the Advanced British Standard. To what extent do you support these assessment principles? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Somewhat support

We have proposed principles to underpin the new grading system. To what extent do you support these grading principles? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Neither support nor oppose

To what extent do you support the proposal that students will receive individual grades/marks for each major and minor (or equivalents) studied within the Advanced British Standard?

Neither support nor oppose

Do you agree that students should receive some type of overall Advanced British Standard award? If yes, what value could an â€˜ABS awardâ€™ add on top of individual component grades, particularly for higher education providers and/or employers?

Don't know

Chapter 4

What strengths in the current approach to 16-19 education should we aim to preserve under the Advanced British Standard?

Please limit your response to 1500 characters or less:

If an ABS system were to be introduced, it would be important to ensure that the current level of coverage at A level, for instance in Mathematics, was preserved in any new 'majors' (hence 350 hours, not 300) to support progression onto study in a closely related discipline at university.
For a Mathematics qualification suitable for learners with Grade 4 to 6 at GCSE, we would also recommend that the course introduced in the International Baccalaureate when it was reformed a few years ago may offer a useful model for consideration, due to what appears to be its modern, applied nature and calculator-based, accessible style.
It is also worth considering the amount of Mathematics already in other subject areas and how that could contribute to any 'minor' or 'major'.

What opportunities and challenges do you see for the recruitment, retention and deployment of staff as a result of implementing the Advanced British Standard?

Bearing in mind the severity of the crisis in recruitment and retention of teachers (and the recruitment of trainees for initial teacher training), the challenges for schools and colleges in staffing a greater number of teaching hours per student would be huge. A need to 'step up the recruitment and retention of our workforce' is acknowledged in the consultation document but not the enormity of this challenge. Information is not offered on how this might be achieved.

The ABS initiative aspires to enhance the future workforce but that could only be achieved in the longer term, if at all, not at the outset. At present there is no prospect of teacher numbers being sufficient for the launch of the ABS.

The question also arises of whether compelling large numbers of students to study English and Mathematics post 16, even when they have achieved at least grade 4, would support retention. This could lead to teachers being faced with many reluctant students on these courses - whereas teaching at Key Stage 5 has often been a very positive aspect for teachers, with classes of students who in the main freely opted to study their subject.

Furthermore, for Mathematics we are gravely concerned about the cessation of a significant number of Mathematics courses in universities, especially post-1992 institutions. These courses had previously provided considerable numbers of recruits for Initial Teacher Training.

What staff training do you think may be required to implement the Advanced British Standard successfully?

Considerable training would be necessary for the attempted implementation of the ABS. If this involved time away from their current classes, this would only exacerbate the existing staffing challenges in schools. If, on the other hand, this involved time outside the teaching day, this poses problems in terms of workload, a key concern of teachers at present. An expectation that teachers undertake extensive training, in some cases outside their existing specialism(s), is unlikely to improve morale or support well-being at the current time. For these reasons, opposition from the teaching unions would also be envisaged.

With the reforms at KS4 and KS5 a decade ago, the changes were introduced in several phases, some subjects before others, to support schools and colleges. There seems not to be any mention of a staggered introduction of the ABS system despite it being far more extensive in its scope.

We are interested in the changes that may need to be made to deliver the Advanced British Standard for all students, regardless of where they live. What changes do you think may be required in the following areas:

The ABS proposals have huge implications for the provider landscape. It would be unrealistic to expect every post 16 provider to offer the full range of different courses envisaged. Each school, each sixth form college and each F.E. college would need to decide which aspects it was in a position to offer. With these decisions being made independently it seems unlikely that Key Stage 4 students in any one location would in fact have potential access to the full range of choices when applying for post 16 study.
Accessing provision at more than one provider would be unlikely to be viable for an individual student in terms of timetabling constraints and travel time and costs.

If you have further views on how the Advanced British Standard could impact 16-19 providers, or anything else covered in Chapter 4, please share below.

In terms of other impacts on post 16 providers, it will not be feasible to introduce any systems such as the proposed ABS and ABS Occupational without significant increase in funding. Post 16 funding per student has declined a great deal in recent years. The requirement for students to study more courses and with an overall increase in teacher time would necessitate large increases in funding, both to pay teachers and to provide sufficient resources.

Chapter 5

What changes to pre-16 education do you think will be needed to create effective pathways into the Advanced British Standard?

Regarding changes to pre-16 education to try to support effective pathways into the ABS, a greater supply of teachers for secondary education would be vital. The prevalence of non-specialist teaching and supply teaching during Key Stages 3 and 4 does not best support progression onto post 16 pathways. Additionally for students struggling to achieve success during Key Stage 4 at Level 1 and/or Level 2, more support is needed at that stage, prior to age 16.

If you have views or evidence on the additional support that may be needed to enable students with SEND to access the Advanced British Standard, please share below.

Regarding the additional support that may be needed to enable students with SEND to access the Advanced British Standard, an increase in the recruitment and retention of learning support assistants would be vital. Schools are already struggling to meet even the needs of EHCP students, let alone wider SEND, in Key Stages 3 and 4. With the proposed increase in teaching time and the proposed inclusion of English and Maths as compulsory subjects for all, the crisis in LSA numbers would be exacerbated.

If you have views or evidence on the additional support that may be needed to enable other groups of students to access the Advanced British Standard, please share them below. Examples of these groups include disadvantaged students and students with caring responsibilities.

With the increased demands on students suggested in the ABS including studying a greater number of subjects and the compulsory inclusion of English and Maths for all, we envisage that students from disadvantaged homes or living with caring responsibilities might struggle more than at present co cope without the same practical parental support available to many other students.

If you have views on how to ensure the Advanced British Standard provides effective pathways into post-18 education or study, please share below.

In regard to concerns about whether the ABS would provide effective pathways into post 18 education or study, the ABS seeks to offer greater breadth. However, as mentioned in our response to question 43, there would be concerns about whether sufficient depth was being simultaneously achieved. If an ABS system were to be introduced, it would be important to ensure that the current level of coverage at A level, for instance in Mathematics, was preserved in any new majors (hence 350 hours, not 300) to support progression onto study in a closely related discipline at university.

If you have further views on anything else associated with the Advanced British Standard not covered in the questions throughout the consultation, please share below.

Currently there is the opportunity for students to take Further Mathematics as an AS qualification. We hope that something similar would still be an option. The ABS proposals refer to range of options for Maths, both as 'majors' and 'minors'. We would welcome more detail on what a Level 3 Applied Major would entail. We would also ask whether the Applied Minor would, in essence, be a rebranding of the current Core Mathematics family of Level 3 qualifications but with far greater student numbers and with a significantly greater proportion of students with lower prior attainment in Maths, especially Grade 4. If so, we would ask that this be reconsidered and something akin to Core Maths be retained for students and that a different qualification, ideally at Level 3, be developed for students with Grade 4. Grade 4 in GCSE Mathematics does not provide a viable starting point for Level 3 study of Mathematics, even as a 'minor'. We would suggest that this often applies to Grade 5 proficiency as well.