

Admissions Office

Statement on A-Level and GCSE reform and its interaction with admissions policy at King's



Background

The College understands that schools and colleges face a challenging time over the next few years as they adapt to the new curriculum environment in England. We also note that schools and colleges are also facing financial constraints, particularly in the delivery of sixth-form curriculum.

King's has a proud tradition of considering student's achievement within their education context. We therefore try, wherever possible, not to restrict access to our programmes based on a decision that has been made by a school or college at a local level, whilst trying to maintain fairness, transparency and equality in admissions for all students.

We understand that many schools and colleges are looking to leading universities, such as King's, for information, advice and guidance on the issue of curriculum reform to ensure that their new sixth-form offering does not disadvantage students in the future. As a university we are also conscious that we do not steer schools and colleges towards unsound pedagogical practices, based primarily on the standard admissions criteria of a particular programme, rather than a programme of sixth-form study that suits their students' needs.

In some ways this issue presents classic 'chicken and egg' characteristics, where each side wants to know what the other is going to do before changing its policy. King's thought it important to provide some insight into how the University will likely act in this area in the future.

A-level

4th AS or A-level

Currently King's College only requires students to present a "fourth" AS-level subject for admissions on to two of its programmes, **Medicine** and **Dentistry**, where a Grade B is required in a fourth AS-level (so an offer may appear as three A-Levels at AAA, and one AS level at B). Currently we feel that this is appropriate and effective additional discriminator between applicants for these programmes, as the level of competition is so strong.

The College already provides the flexibility for the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) to be substituted in place of the fourth AS subject for these subjects. The College does not include the EPQ in our standard offers for two main reasons; not all students have access to the qualification and also this risks making an offer including the EPQ more challenging than the standard offer, penalising students who have sought to stretch themselves. In terms of supporting transition to university-level study the College feels that the EPQ is an excellent tool for supporting independent research skills and allows students to study a particular area in greater depth, which may of course help them to explore their interest in a university subject not offered at post-16 level. This subject exploration could then be included in a personal statement.

In the case of entry to degree programmes offered by our Department of **Mathematics**, our students are required to take Further Mathematics to at least AS-level. This could of course be included in their main three A-levels, in the form of A-level Further Mathematics alongside two other subjects and therefore does not require a fourth A-level.

For **other programmes** the College does not place a significant emphasis on students who present with a fourth full A-level as part of the admissions process. This view has been taken as we understand that not all students have access to a four A-level programme of study at their school or college. Many students with four A-levels, though not a disproportionate amount, are of course successful in gaining places at the College, as they have a large capacity for academic learning, but this can be assessed in a number of different ways, instead of the presentation of a fourth A-level.

Impact of reforms: The College understands that partly as a result of curriculum reform and changes in the post-16 funding landscape, a number of schools and colleges believe that in the future they may not be able to offer students a fourth A-level subject. In these cases the College will waive the requirement for the fourth AS, where applicable, but a **statement must be included** in the first few lines of the UCAS reference to inform us of the school's policy in this regard. The College will review this policy annually as the position for schools and colleges becomes clearer in this area.

AS grades

The College recognises that there are a number of different models which a school or college could choose when considering how to deliver stand-alone AS-level and new linear A-level teaching, based on a number of competing factors.

Currently the College uses AS grade information in a relatively “light touch” manner, therefore the likely reduction in the amount and nature of AS grade information should not prove too problematic for King's. Currently the state school and college funding model requires all institutions to declare the AS grades on student's UCAS forms, but this is not the case for other schools. However, as we are provided with the information for some students, but not others, comparing applicants on this basis is ineffective: therefore to ensure that we neither advantage, nor disadvantage students to a significant extent this light touch process is utilised.

The College's current position is that AS grades are only used as a method of checking the realistic nature of the A-level predicted grades. For example, if the predicted grade is one grade higher than the actual grade of achievement at AS, taking into consideration the referee's comments, the College usually accepts it is realistic for this progression to be achieved, though this seems less likely if this is the case in all three subjects. If a student is being predicted two or more grades above that achieved at AS then we would expect the UCAS reference from the school to very clearly explain why such significant improvement is projected, as this level of progression is considerably less likely in our experience.

Impact of reforms: In the future we understand that there are a large range of options open to schools and colleges in relation to whether AS level exams are completed at all, or in just some subjects. The College will continue to maintain its position in that neither advantage, nor disadvantage will be given to students who present these qualifications at the time of application and therefore this should be a matter for the individual school or college. We will continue to compare AS and predicted grades in a similar manner to that described and the overall policy will be reviewed annually.

Predicted A-level grades

Predicted grades are an important part of the application review process and like all other universities we rely on schools to be as accurate as they possibly can. We also understand that schools and colleges for a variety of reasons wish to predict at a level that the students 'could' achieve and that some level of over-prediction is almost inevitable within the system.

Impact of reforms: We recognise that there is an additional challenge of predicting grades when working with a new syllabus for the first time. However, the likely decrease in the AS grade information will lead to a slightly greater emphasis being placed on such grades. The College has noted that in the past three years the proportions of students gaining the highest grades has decreased each year, however, this does not yet seem to have been reflected in the predicted grades of our applicants.

We also recognise that the University plays its part and it is important that we set entry requirements to reflect the current grading structure of A-levels and have, as a result, changed some of our entry requirements to reflect the current grading of A-level papers. We hope that this will continue to ensure that predicted grades are as accurate as possible and we thank schools and colleges for ensuring this is possible.

Subject choice

The College continues to support the Russell Group's work on Informed Choices (www.russellgroup.ac.uk/informed-choices). It is important to reinforce the point that the facilitating subjects list is just that and there are many other A-level subjects beyond this list which provide a sound platform for both admissions to, and transition to King's. Students should of course check the on-line prospectus to ensure that they are studying any essential subjects, which are always clearly listed.

The College does not operate a list of "unsuitable" or less preferred subjects for admissions purposes, but encourages students to consider the skills which each of their qualifications will provide them with and how these will aid them in their transition to the first year of an undergraduate degree.

Impact of reforms: King's appreciates that under the new post-16 funding model, schools and colleges may find it challenging to offer such a wide range of subjects, especially if the class size is small. If the range of subject choices on offer to students has been restricted then a school or college may wish to include this information in the UCAS reference.

GCSE

Looking slightly further ahead in terms of admissions to university, the College also notes the significant reform to the structure and content of GCSEs that is currently taking place. We have observed with interest the changes to the English Language and English Literature qualifications as well as the reform of the grading scale to include the new Grade 9 for students at the top of the grade scale.

Impact of reforms: Whilst this new grade has the potential to allow for differentiation between applicants in the most competitive areas, such as Medicine and Dentistry, in the first year that students apply to university with the new grades we will consider Grade 9 and Grade 8 equally. Therefore the College will not use the new Grade 9 until we have evidence that it would be appropriate to use this differentiating tool in the selection process.

The College is aware of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and the new Progress8 measure and impact that these are having on the curriculum offering in schools. The College does not consider these 'qualifications' as part of our admissions and selection procedures. King's feels that it is important for schools to offer a range of subjects and qualifications which are appropriate to the educational development needs of their students.

Conclusion

The College truly understands the demands currently being placed on schools and colleges as many of our staff, including myself, are school governors. The College wishes to work closely together

with schools and colleges to ensure that students are provided with a rich and enhancing curriculum that will prepare them well most importantly for the transition to higher education, but also to ensure that they are treated fairly during the admissions process.

The College is committed to working with teachers, and to this end holds an Annual Teachers Conference (www.kcl.ac.uk/study/ug/schoolscolleges/ResourcesEvents/Conference-for-Teachers-and-Advisers.aspx), which will no doubt feature discussion of the implications of GCSE and A Level reforms on progression pathways into university.

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