

# An investigation into secondary school exit standards: Implications for university lecturers

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the A-levels sat by business studies students entering the University of Ulster, in September 2007, and assesses whether the students or the higher education teaching staff are prepared for the challenges ahead. Having looked at arguments for and against the statement that A-levels are getting easier, the paper then highlights the most popular subjects taken by the incoming students. Having examined the A-level assessments used it then compares them with certain assessments used in the first year of university. Although this analysis shows that not all first year undergraduate students will struggle with the intensity of some of the higher education assessments, there is no doubt that university lecturers have to be prepared to provide greater support to the majority.

*Keywords:* A-level; higher education assessment; examination; coursework

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare the Advanced (A) level assessments taken by secondary school students, as well the support they have received from their teachers, with a number of the assessments and the levels of support they will encounter as they enter university. The paper begins by outlining some of the arguments made by both detractors and proponents of the current A-level system, before briefly discussing the environment students will experience in higher education (HE). An analysis of the assessments taken by students enrolling on two of the most popular undergraduate business courses at the University of Ulster (UU) is then provided before the paper concludes by highlighting the implications the findings have for university lecturers. The paper aims to ascertain why students struggle with the assessments they are set on entering tertiary education and suggest what university lecturers can do to make the transition from secondary school less problematic.

### The exit point - A-levels

The claim that A-level assessments are getting easier is one which is made on an annual basis. Critics of the current A-level system support this claim by indicating the yearly increase in higher grades and numbers passing the exam. For example, for A-levels sat in 2008, the pass rate rose for the 26th year in a row with 25.9% of exam entries awarded A grades (Lipsett, 2008). A study by Reform, an independent think tank, found that a student achieving a grade E in A-level Mathematics in 1988 would have achieved a grade B in 2005 (Haldenby, cited in "Getting Easier?", 2005). The study also compared A-levels with other types of secondary education testing systems and found that the pass rate had increased from 81% in 1993 to 96% in 2004, compared with that of the International Baccalaureate, which had fluctuated between 81 and 84%.

One technique used to test the current performance of A-level students is comparing A-level grades with Test of Developed Abilities (TDA) scores. Coe (2007) stated that between the years of 1988 and 2001 there was decline in TDA mean ability scores, a slight jump in 2001 and 2002, with the scores staying flat between 2002 and 2006. The scores were for six subjects: biology, English literature (English), French, geography, history and mathematics (maths), with the latter showing the greatest decline. For example, between 1988 and 2001

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the mean ability score fell from approximately 72.5% to just over 55%. When the TDA score of candidates is compared with their A-level grades for each year since 1988 for the six subjects, it was seen that achievement levels in the latter have risen by about an average of 2 grades in each subject. The exception is maths, where from 1988 the rise appears to be about 3.5 grades. Coe (2007) felt this could be interpreted as meaning that candidates of comparable ability were being awarded higher grades each year. Furthermore, Haldenby (2005) felt that standards had fallen steadily since the Department for Education took on the responsibility for regulating them in 1988. The Department is in the challenging position of trying to maintain the standard of assessments and, at the same time, increase the number of students passing at higher grades.

However, there are several arguments put forward that refute the claim that A-levels are getting easier and these are discussed below (adopted from Coe, 2007).

### ***Teaching and learning have improved***

This is argued every year by teachers and their associations. However, it is hard to see how the claim could be convincingly substantiated. The Office for Standards in Education purports to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, but its judgements have little scientific credibility (Coe, 2007). Nevertheless, the fact that teachers apply themselves in a way they never used to must be taken into account. They are expected to meet their head teachers' targets and teach to boards' assessment criteria, but they also become caught up in their pupils' (and parents') fervent aspirations (Smith, cited in "Getting Easier?", 2005).

### ***Exam performance has improved***

It could be that modern phenomena such as the increasing pressures of league tables and the intensive setting of targets might lead to an increased focus on aspects of examination (exam) preparation, without necessarily having any effect on learning. Tactics, such as paying closer attention to syllabus content, endlessly practising previous years' papers or being more selective about who is actually allowed to sit the exams, could all have this effect. This point has also been raised by a number of writers, who felt that teachers now focus on the content of tests, administer repeated practice tests, train students in the answers to specific questions or types of question, and adopt transmission styles of teaching (Harlen, 2005). Therefore, according to Gordon and Rees (1997), teachers can train students to pass any kind of test.

### ***Changes in assessment have made the same levels of competence easier to demonstrate***

Changes such as the introduction of assessed coursework or the use of modular exams could arguably have had this effect. The quality of work presented for exam may well be equal to or better than that of candidates in previous years, and therefore standards could not really be said to have fallen. However, given identical conditions, today's candidates might nevertheless be unable to match the performance of their predecessors. Modules are seen as favouring the generalist and not the especially talented. Smith (cited in "Getting Easier?", 2005) also felt that the system of modular exams permits and encourages resitting, and there is no doubt that judicious early takes and retakes boost an individual's chances of fulfilling potential.

### ***Demographic changes have facilitated increased academic achievement***

Because of the increasing proportion of the population that can be classified as belonging to the higher socio-economic groups, and the well known correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Coe, 2007), it is sometimes argued that this can explain the year-on-year rises in grades awarded. Associated with this argument is the fact that students increasingly realise that they need qualifications to gain employment and have successful lives and are therefore more motivated to get better grades. In the past there were arguably more job opportunities for those that left education during or at the end of the secondary level. However, as societies have moved from being industrial to more service-oriented, a lot of these opportunities have disappeared.

### ***The content and style of General Certificate of Education (GCE) exams have changed too much to make valid comparison possible***

The GCE is a secondary-level academic qualification, which is divided into two levels: A-level and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GSCE). Another level, the Advanced Subsidiary level (AS-level), was added in 1999 (see Priestley, 2003, for an outline of what led to this and other changes to the curriculum for 16-19 year olds). Some commentators feel that the introduction of this exam (taken at the end of year 12 or lower sixth) has also had a positive effect on A-level results. For example, Baker (2003) felt that as a typical student sits four AS-levels at the end of year 12, but normally only sit three A-levels at the end of year 13, they have been able to drop their weakest subject coming into their final year. Therefore, the AS-level acts as a kind of filter for the A-level (or A2 as they have also been referred to since the introduction of AS-levels). However, there is another aspect of choice and that concerns the actual subjects taken. Students sitting A-levels now have a wider range of subject areas to choose from. For example, business studies, information and communication technology (ICT), and media studies, would not have featured on curricula 25 years ago. Therefore, students are able to choose subjects in which they have more of a natural interest, and this is likely to lead to improved performance.

Making a judgement about changes in grade standards over time requires that exams at different times are measuring broadly the same thing. Therefore, although today's candidates might perform very poorly on an exam of 10 years ago, candidates prepared for the older exam could equally struggle with today's papers. Thus it is hard to argue that either is really harder, they are simply different. This point was raised by Tomlinson (2002) in his report that followed the A-level grades crisis of 2002. Tomlinson acknowledged that changes to the qualification structure, syllabus content and assessment methods made the task of comparing standards from year-to-year more difficult. It is perhaps worth mentioning that since this report was published, with its numerous recommendations, A-level results have continued to improve.

Another explanation for the improvement comes from the removal of caps on the percentage of grades that can be awarded. In 1965, when grades were first awarded, only 10% of places were to be allocated for "A"s. However, the cap on the percentage of A and all other grades was removed in 1982 (Harrison, 2003), so there is no enforced limit on the number of students who can achieve such a grade. Baker (2003) made a further interesting point about grades. Grades are made up of marks so whereas the maximum mark for an A-level is 600, the minimum an A grade requires is 480 marks: a substantial difference. Across three A-levels the range between candidates could be even greater: a student with three maximum scores would have gained 1,800 marks while another who achieved their three A grades with the minimum scores would have 1,440. There has been a suggestion of introducing a "super-grade" A\* in 2010, with more difficult questions to stretch the brightest pupils, which would undoubtedly begin to feature on the entrance criteria of universities. If such a grade is not introduced, more universities may follow the example of institutions like Cambridge, which has had to use admissions tests to select the best students (Asthana, 2007). Cambridge University also announced in 2008 that, along with fellow members of the research intensive Russell Group, it would look less favourably at "softer subjects" when it came to determining admissions. These include A-levels in subjects such as business studies, design and technology, media studies, and photography (BBC, 2008).

A further point to consider is the advancements in technology that have occurred, particularly over the past 10 years with regard to the internet. There is a vast amount of information instantly available to students via a personal computer that in the past they would have had to search for in text books, taking considerably longer, and they would not have been able to use so many different sources so easily. This increased knowledge about a topic can lead to a greater understanding as well as the retention of certain buzz words or phrases that can be used to gain marks in an exam.

It should also be pointed out that the perception that everyone is now passing A-levels is incorrect. Although there is no doubt that leaving school after sitting GCSEs in Year 11 is not as popular as it was 30 years ago, fewer than 40% of the relevant age group went on to attempt A-levels in 2003. Furthermore, in the same year, just over 25% of the age cohort, or not much more than 1 in 4, achieved three grade Es or better at A-level (Baker, 2003). Therefore, when one reads that "96.9 per cent of students got at least one grade E pass" in the 2007 A-levels (Channel 4 News, 2007, para. 4) the figure has to be put into context.

Finally, despite the robust defence of A-levels by successive United Kingdom governments, it was announced in 2007 that they could be replaced by diplomas in 2013. Three new diplomas in science, languages and the humanities, will be introduced in 2011 at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels, to take pupils from 14 to 19. In the initial phase they will run alongside GCSEs and A-levels, but a review in 2013 will consider whether the diplomas are a better alternative (O' Leary, 2007).

### **The entrance point - the first year at university**

One major area where the changing nature of the A-level assessment is having an impact is that of tertiary education. With more school leavers now opting for HE, it could be argued that it is universities that have to confront the skill deficiencies resulting from the different nature of the learning environment, which a typical A-level student has experienced, than employers in the general job market. This is most evident in the area of assessment, where certain exam papers sat during a student's first year at university could require a student to write four essays, for each of which 45 minutes is allocated. In such cases the examiner is looking for a conventional essay, with an introduction, a main body and some conclusions, whereas some students have only been faced with much smaller questions when sitting exams at secondary school. Whilst not all exam papers will be structured in this way, particularly in more computational modules, as students progress through university it is more likely that they will be required to write essays as part of the assessment process. Therefore, the problem is passed on to the later years of their study.

This phenomenon was studied by Cook *et al.* (2006), who investigated the transition of students from school to university and the increasing retention problems universities were having. As part of their studies they looked at A-level Biology, as set by the Northern Ireland (NI) exam body, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), in 2002. They found that about 80% of the marks were awarded for exams. There were a total of 6.75 hours of exam time spread over 2 years, with the maximum duration of an exam being 90 minutes. Distributing the marks over the available time indicated that a candidate should spend no more than 18 minutes on any one question. In the exam, a total of 17% of the marks were awarded

for answers written in continuous prose. However, analysis of the questions that asked for answers in continuous prose revealed that they were normally highly structured with as many as 12 indicators to structure for a 13-mark answer. Thus, although the students had to write in English, they were rarely asked to construct an argument or compose a piece requiring a beginning, middle and an end. Even allowing that most candidates would have been taking three A-levels, this exam schedule represents approximately half the intensity of exams typically experienced in HE.

It would appear therefore that the system whereby “universities worked closely with schools to ensure that the curriculum was designed to produce young people ready to slot seamlessly into university life” (Thomson, 2008, p. 31) has gone. And whilst universities may not like the fact that they have to make up the deficiencies in the skills of the incoming student, this is a task they are going to have to increasingly perform. One way to ease this process is giving university staff a greater understanding of the skills and knowledge required in order to pass a current A-level. The aim of this research is to investigate the exit standards of secondary schools in order to create a better understanding amongst university lecturers of what challenges they face preparing first year students for tertiary education. This is not a straightforward task. As Birkhead (2007, para. 6) pointed out, “it is not easy for university teachers to persuade students to unlearn the tricks they’ve learnt at school”. However, if this does not happen, drop out rates are likely to continue to rise and degree classifications could fall. This puts extra pressure on universities as “they too are increasingly trapped within an assessment-driven system” (Birkhead, 2007, para. 6).

## Methodology

This paper aims to answer the research question: Why do students find the initial HE assessments so challenging? The supposition is that the skills required to pass A-levels are not comparable to those needed to progress through university. In order to answer this question, UU business studies undergraduates were used as the subjects of an explanatory case study (Yin, 2003). A document content analysis was also employed in order to analyse the assessments and support that students enrolling onto two of the most popular business studies courses at UU experienced. The research therefore sought to extend the work of Cook *et al.* (2006), by looking at a wider range of A-level subjects and their assessments. A document content analysis can be seen as an alternative to other data collection methods such as questionnaires, interviews and observation, and thus is a source of data in its own right (Denscombe, 2007). Denscombe went on to list some of the disadvantages of this method of data collection: credibility of the source and that the documents can owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture or reality. However, as the documents analysed were A-level papers produced by accredited examination boards, neither of these drawbacks are relevant. Whilst it can reasonably be assumed that the problems faced by students on entering UU are not unique, this type of research could be developed further into a wider study with a larger number of HE institutions and examination boards analysed. More details with regard to the analysis are provided in the following section.

## Analysis

The research first looked at the A-level subjects taken by first year BSc Business Studies and BSc Accounting students at UU’s Jordanstown campus for the academic year 2007/2008. The enrolments for students on these programmes were 135 and 75 respectively. The information was gathered from the application forms of the students. From these applications, the 10 most popular A-level subjects, in terms of the number of students studying them, were selected. Table 1 shows these subjects along with the various exam boards that set the curricula and assessments. Accounting was also selected, as although it was not in the top ten subjects overall it was one of the most popular for potential accounting students. In addition to the CCEA, the boards are: Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA); Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts (OCR); Edexcel (name derived from Educational Excellence); and Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC). It is perhaps worth noting that the 10 most popular A-levels include three that Cambridge University would regard as “soft” (BBC, 2008): business studies, ICT and media studies. The aforementioned Russell Group would also categorise accounting in this manner.

The research team then analysed the following documents of each of the above subjects, as well as accounting:

- the specification
- past papers
- coursework guidance
- guidance notes for teachers
- marking guides
- examiners’ reports

Subject/Board	CCEA	AQA	OCR	Edexcel	WJEC	Other	Total
Business Studies	37	42	5	1	0	2	87
ICT	36	4	21	4	0	1	66
Geography	31	7	0	0	0	0	38
Maths	26	0	0	10	0	1	37
Religious Studies	24	7	0	1	0	0	32
Biology	19	10	0	0	0	2	31
History	14	1	0	0	0	2	17
English	6	6	0	1	0	2	15
Economics	12	3	0	0	0	0	15
Media Studies	0	4	0	0	9	2	15
Total	205	84	26	17	9	12	353

**Table 1:** The number of students sitting A-Level subjects by examination board

These documents were either obtained by referring to the websites of the various examining bodies or, if the documents were not available by this means, by contacting them and requesting the information. The authors analysed the documents against a checklist they had devised with the aim of investigating the following areas:

- the structure of the exam paper
- the length of answers required
- the number of attempts a student could make to pass the subject and choice within that subject
- the quality of written communication
- how the papers and coursework were marked
- guidance for teachers and the assistance they give to students
- coursework

It should be noted that if less than three students studied an A-level under a particular board it was not analysed. The findings are now discussed under the above headings.

## Findings

### The structure of the paper

The length of the exam papers ranged from 45 minutes (AS History and Economics, CCEA and AS Business Studies, OCR) to three hours (A2 English, AQA), but the latter was rare and the average paper lasted 1 hour and 20 minutes. Although certain papers were sat several days apart, there were a number of instances where students sat two or three papers in the same morning or afternoon, as outlined in Table 2, and worth of note is that it tended to be board-specific. For example, students sitting ICT papers with CCEA had at least 8 days between papers and students sitting Business Studies papers with the same board only sat 2 AS papers at the same time. As can be seen from Table 2, this differed from students being examined by the other boards. Indeed, all subjects sat under the AQA board had sittings in the same period for at least two exams. What Table 2 demonstrates is that students can face three hour exam sittings and are not necessarily used to taking short exams for a subject over a number of weeks.

Although some papers had questions that only had one component, in the majority of exams the questions were broken into several components that in some cases were worth only one or two marks. Another factor that could arguably make questions easier to answer is when students write their answers on the question paper itself. This was the case for all papers in Biology (CCEA and AQA), Geography (AQA) and ICT (OCR), for papers at the AS level for ICT and Geography (CCEA), and for two out of the three papers at AS level for Accounting (AQA). This is further explored in the next subsection.

Several exam papers contained what are known as data response questions, for example CCEA Biology and Economics. These are where the questions begin with a section of narrative text (often accompanied by a graph or diagram) about which the students have to answer questions. For the final CCEA Biology A2 paper one question consisted of a 20 line passage on which students had to answer six questions, and for five or these they were guided to the appropriate line or lines in the passage, thereby reducing the requisite decision making skills. Reading time was not allocated in these exams, although it was in two of the Media Studies papers (AQA) where students were advised to spend the allocated time reading or reviewing the appropriate texts. However, there were no restrictions about beginning to answer the question within this time. This was not the case with the final A2 CCEA English paper, which was two hours in length: students had to spend 30 minutes reading and were not handed the answer book until this period had elapsed.

Subject	Board	Papers	Length of papers (total hours)
Accounting	AQA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22	Both 1¼ hours (2½ hours)
Biology	AQA	AS1 and AS2	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	CCEA	AS2 and AS3	Both 1 hour (2 hours)
Business Studies	AQA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	CCEA	AS2 and AS3	Both 1 hour (2 hours)
	OCR	AS1, AS2 and AS3	1¾ hours and 1¼ hours (3 hours)
Economics	AQA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
	AQA	A22 and A23	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	CCEA	AS1 and AS2	Both ¾ hour (1½ hours)
English	AQA	AS1 and AS3	1 hour and 2 hours (3 hours)
Geography	AQA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	CCEA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
History	CCEA	AS2 and AS3	Both ¾ hour (1½ hours)
ICT	AQA	AS1 and AS2	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	OCR	AS1 and AS3	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	OCR	A21 and A23	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
Maths	Edexcel	AS1 and AS2	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
Media Studies	AQA	AS1 and AS2	1¼ hours and 1½ hours (2¾ hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
	WJEC	AS1 and AS2	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)
Religious Studies	AQA	AS1, AS2 and AS3	All 1 hour (3 hours)
	AQA	A21 and A22 (depending on option)	Both 1½ hours (3 hours)

**Table 2:** Exams sat in the same morning or afternoon session

Another point of interest is with regard to the instructions given on the front of exam papers, which in several cases was comprehensive and generally more detailed than that of a university paper. For example, in the CCEA Maths papers students were instructed to “show clearly the development of your answer”. This would be an important feature of an answer in a typical accounting paper at university and yet students would not receive this information on the front cover. The advice given to students sitting some of the AQA Media Studies exams was very detailed, informing students of what skills they were expected to demonstrate and what work they would need to present in order to gain marks.

### **The length of the answers required**

Dividing the time allowed by the marks awarded for a paper gives an indication of how many minutes it takes to obtain a mark. Therefore, this can act as a guide to how long a student should spend on a particular question. This varied from 0.71 minutes a mark (all three AQA Accounting A2 papers) to 4 minutes a mark (CCEA English final A2 paper). However, the average across all papers was 1.34 minutes a mark. Apart from the English papers, which were the exceptions in several areas of analysis, students had between 1 and (just under) 34 minutes to answer a component of a question. The longest time they had to spend on a question that was not broken down into smaller components was 60 minutes (CCEA History A2 paper). However, single answers for English papers ranged from 60 to 105 minutes in length. Guidance as to how much students should write, or how long they should spend on a question was sometimes provided. For example, on all the CCEA Economics papers students were told to “take account of the marks for each question and part question in allocating the available examination time”. An example of more specific guidance was provided on all three CCEA Biology A2 papers, where students were told that they “should spend approximately 20 minutes on Section B”, a 15 mark question. More general guidance was given when questions are answered in the question booklets, as the length of an answer is limited by the space provided. An example of this is provided in the CCEA ICT AS second paper where two components were both worth six marks and they required either eight or ten lines of writing. For this particular paper, these were the longest pieces of writing the students had to do.

### **The number of attempts allowed and the level of choice**

Apart from CCEA English, where the various elements could only be taken once, students could sit the various

exams or submit any coursework as many times as they wished. The only caveat was that certain elements had a “shelf life”, so if a particular topic was no longer tested, the student could not sit an out-of-date exam. It should also be noted that in a small number of specifications it was not stated either way if students could attempt an element more than once. In all cases, when a student resits an exam or resubmits a piece of coursework the best mark obtained counts towards the final award. Another noteworthy point is that there seems to be no suggestion of failure attached to any of this resitting or resubmission. This point is revisited in the implications section.

The choice of modules within a subject, and even choice of questions within exam papers, is quite limited. For ICT (not Edexcel), Accounting and Biology (CCEA) there was no module choice and all exam questions were compulsory. For Business Studies (AQA and CCEA), Economics (AQA), English, Geography (AQA), Media Studies and History there was no choice of modules, but for the English and History exams there was a choice of options within each module and a choice of exam questions within each option. However, for Business Studies (AQA and CCEA), Economics (AQA), Geography (AQA) and Media Studies there was some choice, but also some compulsory exam questions. For Biology (AQA), Business Studies (OCR) and Maths there was a choice of modules, but all exam questions were compulsory. For Economics and Geography (both CCEA) there was a choice of modules and some choice in the exam paper. Only for ICT (Edexcel) and Religious Studies were there both a choice of modules and a choice of questions in the exam. Another element of choice surrounded the order in which students took the various modules. Although they were advised to take them in their sequential order and at the end of the recommended period of study, students were often allowed to sit them in any order and take exams early (i.e., in January instead of May or June).

### The quality of written communication

On average, four marks per paper were awarded for a student’s quality of written communication, although in some papers only two marks were awarded. OCR (2005) defined this as the student’s ability to:

- select and use a form and style of writing appropriate to purpose and complex subject matter
- organise relevant information clearly and coherently, using specialist vocabulary when appropriate
- ensure text is legible, and spelling, grammar and punctuation are accurate, so that meaning is clear (p. 12)

The other exam boards’ definitions are very similar. The low number of marks awarded could be interpreted as a token attempt to persuade students to use an acceptable level of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and may encourage them to focus their efforts elsewhere. On the CCEA Economics papers it was stated that the quality of written communication would be assessed in certain questions, but no guidance was given as to how many marks were allocated for this element. This was similar to the AQA Media Studies papers, where it was stated that “the legibility of your handwriting and the accuracy of your spelling, punctuation and grammar will also be considered”, but students were not told what marks were available. A noteworthy point is made in one of the AQA AS marking guides (2007) where markers were instructed to award one mark (out of a possible four) for the quality of written communication even if “errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling may be noticeable and intrusive suggesting a weakness in these areas”.

Subject	Board	Papers	Length of writing time
Biology	AQA	1 x A2	44 minutes
Business Studies	AQA	1 x A2	40 minutes
	CCEA	1 x A2	30 minutes
	OCR	1 x A2	30 minutes
English	AQA	All papers	60 minutes (2 x AS); 2 x 60 minutes (other AS and 1 x A2); 90 minutes; 75 minutes and 105 minutes (other A2)
	CCEA	2 x A3 and 3 x A2	60 minutes; 2 x 60 minutes (AS); 2 x 75 minutes; 70 minutes; 90 minutes (A2)
Geography	AQA	2 x A2	30 minutes per paper
History	CCEA	All 6 papers	34 minutes (1 x AS); 33 minutes (2 x AS); 2 x 45 minutes; 60 minutes; 30 minutes (A2)
Media Studies	CCEA	2 x AS and 2 x A2	60 minutes; 2 x 45 minutes (AS); 2 x 45 minutes; 60 minutes (A2)
Religious Studies	AQA	3 x A2	2 x 45 minutes per paper
	CCEA	1 x A2	2 x 30 minutes

**Table 3:** Papers requiring essays or continuous prose of 30 minutes or more

Another aspect of written communication that is often highlighted by lecturers when students first arrive at university is their ability to write essays. English *et al.* (2004) stated that amongst the many criticisms of student writing by academics is a tendency for students to conceive of an essay as a list of what they know about the topic. Such a viewpoint is also supported from other studies (Webb *et al.*, 1995; English *et al.*, 1999), which concluded that there are cultural differences between school and university regarding expectations about writing. Table 3 outlines the papers where students were expected to write an essay or at least in continuous prose. Papers where students were asked to write in report format or where a piece of written work would have taken less than 30 minutes have not been included. It should also be noted that the WJEC papers for Media Studies were not available. As can be seen in Table 3, students can spend a considerable amount of time writing. For example, in English (AQA and CCEA), History, Media Studies (both CCEA) and Religious Studies (AQA) students had to write for 45 minutes or over. Therefore, it is not necessarily the case that a student will not be used to writing a 45 minute essay as required in a university exam.

### **How the papers and coursework were marked**

In all cases, markers were instructed not to take away any marks for irrelevant material, in other words they were to mark positively. Marks were also available for factors apart from applied knowledge. For example, in AQA Business Studies marks were awarded for analysis and evaluation, with the emphasis on these two factors increasing from the first AS module to the third.

### **Guidance for teachers and the assistance they give to students**

Teachers are provided with a substantial amount of guidance, as demonstrated by the amount of documentation used in this research. The specification is very precise about what is required in the various elements of assessment, with some even providing advice on typical exam verbs such as explain, describe and identify. It is reasonable to assume that much of this guidance will be passed onto the students due to the pressures schools are under to improve or maintain exam performance. Furthermore, teachers also assist in some areas of coursework as they are encouraged to discuss possible topics with their students or advise them on suitable projects. For the seen case studies in the AQA Business Studies, which made up the assessment for two units, teachers are instructed to provide assistance and advice as required.

### **Coursework**

Despite the introduction of coursework as part of the A-level assessment (Coe, 2007) it was not overly prevalent in this study. For example, it was not used in Accounting, Economics (CCEA), Geography (CCEA), History, Maths and Religious Studies (AQA), and was only optional for Business Studies (all boards), Economics (AQA), English (AQA) and Geography (AQA). In Biology (CCEA) it was used in two modules that also had exam elements. Likewise for the same subject under AQA: two modules were tested by coursework, but one also had an exam element. Apart from Edexcel's ICT module, no subject had more than two coursework-only modules. When coursework is used it is internally marked, but externally moderated. For some subject areas students could choose from a list of approved topics or, with consultation with their teacher, choose their own. Some coursework is carried out in class time, for example the test of practical skills and abilities that formed the CCEA AS Biology coursework. For the CCEA Religious Studies AS coursework five hours of class time was seen as sufficient to complete it. In general, there were no time limits placed on the coursework and students were given it on beginning their year of study and had the entire year to complete it. For example, for the OCR ICT AS coursework students had to complete a series of structured practical ICT tasks. These tasks were given to students in a booklet in September 2005, with the deadline for completion being early May 2006.

### **Implications for universities**

The above findings demonstrate how different A-levels are compared to some of the assessments that students will face during their first year at university. On the whole, the papers they have sat are much shorter and far more highly structured than those that they will face in HE. The fact that in several cases students have to answer all questions in an exam paper could explain why some students answer six questions in a university paper, when they only had to complete four, therefore seriously reducing their chances of getting a good mark or even passing. In general, the instructions given on the front of an A-level paper are substantially more detailed than those on a university exam. However, there were several examples of three hour sittings so it is not necessarily true that A-level students only take short exams, spread over a number of days. Moreover, looking at the length of some of the essays or continuous prose answers required to pass certain exams, it cannot be said that students are only used to answering short, structured questions.

To give an idea of the assessments Business Studies and Accounting students face in their first year at UU a breakdown is provided in Table 4. Whilst a variety of assessments are used, both sets of students have to sit a number of exams that require answers ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. Students often face their first class test after 4 weeks of study in the first semester. This is far earlier than they are used to for a piece of summative assessment. Furthermore, the majority of these are multiple choice tests whereas out of the

119 A-level exams analysed only two were of a similar format. Whilst some of the class tests are completed within question booklets, answers have to be written in separate documents for all of the exams. Contrary to the practice in secondary schools, any resits of university assessments are capped at the minimum pass mark.

Subject (Accounting = A, Business Studies = B)	Semester	Examination (number of questions to be answered)	Coursework
Accounting 1 (A and B)	1(A); 2(B)	No examination	3 x 45 minute class test, 1 x 2 hour class test
Accountancy Today (A) / Management Skills (B)	1	2 hour examination (2)	Series of class tests on IT skills
Business Economics (A and B)	1/2(A); 1(B)	3 hour examination (4)	1 x essay, 1 x 1 hour class test
Quantitative Analysis (A)	1/2	No examination	4 x 45 minute class test, 2 x 1 hour class test
Organisational Studies (B)	1	3 hour examination (4)	1 x 1 hour class test, 1 x group project
Accounting 2 (A)	2	3 hour examination (4)	3 x 1 hour class test
Costing/Personal Finance (A)	2	2 x 2 hour examination (3)	1 x 1 hour class test, 5 x pieces of homework, 1 x report
Business Environment (B)	2	3 hour examination (4)	1 x 1 hour class test, 1 x essay
Business Law (B)	2	No examination	Series of 30 minute online tests

**Table 4:** First year assessments at the University of Ulster

Another major issue is the collaborative relationship A-level students have with teaching staff, who are prepared to provide considerable assistance with coursework and who regularly provide formative and individual feedback. Moreover, the students are generally used to receiving detailed guidance about the assessments they face. Furthermore, A-level students have a lot more time to assimilate the material. Although they are allowed to sit exams early if they wish (i.e., in January), they would usually have over 8 months to prepare for them. This is in contrast to university where there are 12 weeks of lectures, followed by a short revision period, which in the first semester takes place over the Christmas holidays. Indeed, some universities hold their first semester exams prior to the Christmas break. Additionally, all exams take place within a two week time period and there are strict deadlines for all coursework. Finally, the fact that they are used to being able to take an assessment as many times as they wish, without any stigma of failure, could also explain the almost casual acceptance of not passing that some students seem to have on arriving at university. Therefore, depending on the A-levels taken, students have varying degrees of preparation for the first year's assessments.

All of the above has implications for staff working in HE institutions, particularly those institutions that have to compete for students. The "sink or swim" attitude is no longer acceptable, particularly as it is not the individual student's fault that they are not necessarily prepared for university assessments. Firstly, a lot more thought has to go into the design of the first year curriculum, especially the development of skills that will be lacking in incoming students, such as essay writing, critical thinking and independent learning. Reisz (2008) felt that many students entering universities lack the rigour for reading around a subject as they are so used to instant gratification and believe that information that lays more than three clicks away does not exist. Assuming that someone else will be covering such matters or that students will develop such skills independently will no longer suffice. University lecturers, particularly in the first semester, need to be far more willing to provide structured support for both coursework and exam preparation. Generally therefore, lecturers will have to be more empathetic towards students and assist them as they make the transition from secondary school to university. Changes are taking place, for example in 2008/09 the content of Accountancy Today (first semester UU Accounting module) was modified to include essay writing and exercises in critical reflection. These changes were made after a skills gap was identified. Furthermore, the University of Gloucester recently announced it would be reducing the amount students are assessed by one fifth on most courses in order to promote deep learning and provide better feedback (Attwood, 2008). However, despite decreasing the intensity of assessments, such a move will not solve all of the transition problems outlined above.

## Conclusions

This paper looked at the assessments that the 2007/2008 intake of UU Business Studies and Accounting undergraduate students had taken, and compared them with those they would encounter on entering university. It aimed to investigate secondary school exit standards by analysing the various exams and coursework that students were used to either sitting or submitting. There is little doubt that on the whole the exams consisted of short, highly structured papers that rarely required the students to write in continuous prose. Indeed, some questions only required a one word answer. In several cases the students

completed the papers in the exam booklets themselves which gave them a good idea of how long their answers needed to be. When it came to coursework, the students faced no real deadlines and were used to getting a substantial amount of assistance from their teachers. However, coursework was not as widely used as the authors expected it to be.

There is no doubt, therefore, that there is already a considerable gap for students to make up when they leave secondary school and enter HE. There is also little doubt that HE on the whole has been slow to react to changes in secondary education. This has serious implications, particularly as the situation could become exacerbated when vocational diplomas are introduced in 2011 as, in all likelihood, students will need less of the skills required at university to pass them. Universities must respond by providing students with more generic skills. Moreover, lecturers have to accept that they are responsible for making up the skill deficiencies of incoming students and cannot assume it will happen automatically. Currently there is a prevailing attitude that either the student is to blame for their own predicament or that teaching skills such as essay writing is the role of the secondary school. This can leave the student struggling to cope with a number of challenges, with lecturers reluctant to assist them. However, the student is not at fault for the system they have encountered and is entitled to some initial support as they enter tertiary education. As Thomson (2008, p. 26) stated, "we can't turn our backs on the league-table generation".

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