

AS and A level reform: regulations for modern foreign languages

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

Question 1

- 2 That students are again to be required to refer to cultural and social aspects of the countries where the language is spoken is welcomed.
- 3 The inclusion of translation in the AS, not just A2, is also welcome.
- 4 April is too early for the oral examination. Not all of the syllabus will be covered by that time and there will be insufficient time for speaking practice by then. The speaking test should be conducted in May or June.

Question 2

- 5 The statement that "assessments tasks should not be restricted to the vocabulary lists" seems to render such lists nugatory. Of course students should have some capacity to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary but in practice the experience of doing so is readily available to them. Other subjects do not examine material not in the specification. Even were the vocabulary to be fully in the specification students would still be challenged. Context and understanding of/manipulation of sentence structure are still essential for students to deal successfully with the material presented.

Question 3

- 6 The 'independent research' proposal at A2 is welcome. It provides a different and more realistic set of challenges than a timed written examination and would allow those taking the subject but whose primary interest lies elsewhere to pursue a topic relevant to their main studies.

- 7 However, there is some concern about the weight of the topic, and the amount of work that would be expected of the student. Nor is it clear if this is to be separate from cultural topics studied, such as literature.

Question 4

- 8 It would be better for all students to be examined by external examiners. It is understood that Ofqual believes this not to be possible in the immediate future, due to numbers of examiners required, but it should be an aim towards which Ofqual and the examination boards should set themselves to move. Only thus can students' be assured that their test is of the same standard as that of others in different centres.
- 9 In the meantime teachers will need training and much work will be involved for whoever conducts the assessment at A2, preparing individual questions on the candidates' various chosen research topics.
- 10 An audio-visual recording is likely to make students more nervous, but would ensure that no help is given by the examiner (especially useful if a teacher is conducting the test). Ofqual should make a decision on whether all examination boards use audio or audio-visual, and not leave the decision with them, so that all students go through the same procedure.
- 11 Five minutes seems too short for the A2 preparation, and would be better prior to the examination rather than during it.

Question 5

- 12 It seems to be acceptable to language teachers to allow no access to dictionaries, though this does render the examination a rather artificial environment. This is somewhat ameliorated by the introduction of a research project.

Question 6

- 13 No comment.

Question 7

- 14 No comment.

Question 8

- 15 No comment.

Question 9

- 16 No comment.

General remarks

- 17 Though it is outside the scope of the present consultation it is worth noting that ASCL is also looking for a root and branch review of modern foreign language education. There are too many issues in the learning, pedagogy, assessment and qualifications in modern foreign languages in this country for piecemeal changes such as this to have any chance of addressing.
- 18 The format of Ofqual consultation documents assumes that respondents will print them out and hand write responses. This is not now likely to be the preferred mode of response for many. Please issue documents and in a more friendly format that will allow for ready response by email. There is an option of an online questionnaire, but this is also not helpful to corporate respondents such as ASCL.
- 19 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Martin Ward
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Association of School and College Leaders
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