

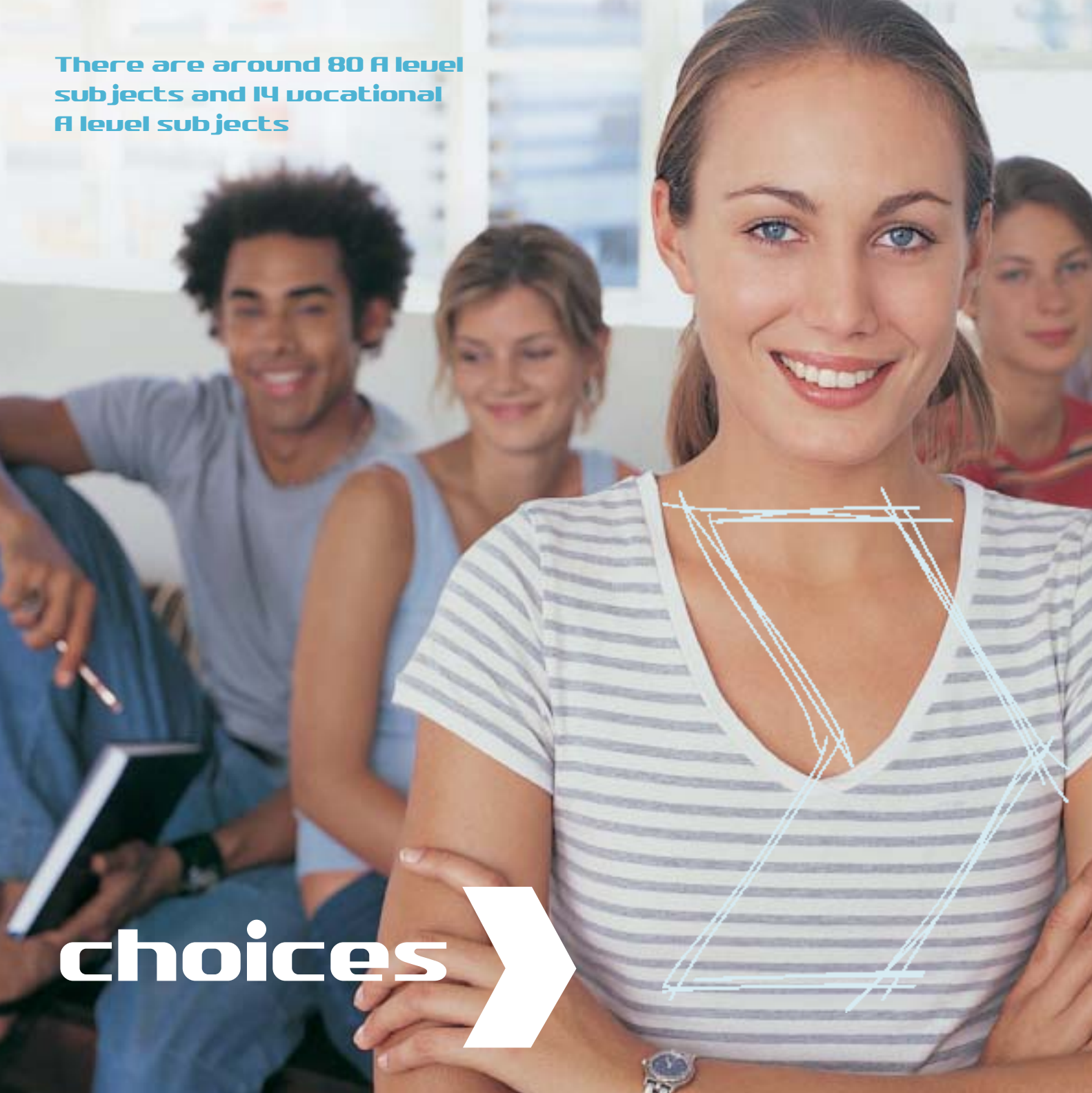
AS and A levels

the official student guide
to the system



There are around 80 A level subjects and 14 vocational A level subjects

choices



the low-down on A levels

Have you ever wondered who sets your exam paper or what happens to it when you hand it in at the end of your exam? If so, read on! This guide is designed to give you all the information that you need about the A level system.

In the past, A level students typically chose three subjects and sat exams at the end of two years. In 2000, the new AS/A2 system was put into place. An A level usually consists of three AS and three A2 units. Now, in your first year (usually year 12), you can choose to study up to five subjects, each consisting of three AS units, and sit AS (advanced subsidiary) level exams.

At the end of your first year you have two options for each subject:

- ▶ take an AS level and gain a recognised qualification or
- ▶ continue for a second year and go for the full A level.

Either way, the good news is:

- AS levels allow you to mix a number of subjects – and you can keep your options open a bit longer.
- If you're worried about your future after the first year – maybe you want a job, a year out, can't face more exams or you think a different type of qualification is the way forward for you – you have something to show for your work, rather than feeling you've wasted a year.
- If you stay on into your A2 year, you have control over the subjects you study. You can pay more attention to the subjects that you enjoy and need for the future. You'll take three A2 units in each subject.

You can also take vocational A levels. These are available in 14 subjects. You can take the units in any order because, unlike other A levels, they are all assessed at the full A level standard (rather than AS and A2).

If you are expecting to get A grades in your A levels you may want to consider taking an advanced extension award (AEA). These are designed to provide a further challenge to anyone who is expecting to achieve A grades. From 2006 they will officially count towards your UCAS points score to get into university. However, many universities will begin to count them next year.



**in the
know** 

who's who in the A level world

Five awarding bodies, better known as exam boards, cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Your school, college or sixth-form centre chooses a syllabus from one of the exam boards for each subject.

The exam boards are:

AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
www.aqa.org.uk

CCEA (Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk

Edexcel (The Edexcel Foundation)
www.examzone.co.uk or
www.edexcel.org.uk

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
www.ocr.org.uk

WJEC/CBAC (Welsh Joint Education Committee)
www.wjec.co.uk

The exam boards are overseen by the regulatory authorities.

The regulatory authorities are:

ACCAC (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales)
www.accac.org.uk

CCEA (Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk

QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority)
www.qca.org.uk

As regulators, it's their job to monitor standards and the quality of examining across the exam boards and make sure you get a fair deal.

In 2003, awarding bodies issued 780,000 A level results and 1 million AS results



**game
plan**



what happens when?



Each year thousands of students, with the support of their teachers, work hard towards their AS and A level qualifications. Awarding bodies and their regulators take great care to ensure that high standards are maintained from year to year so that students get a fair deal and the grades they deserve.

So, what do the awarding bodies and regulators do and why?

The syllabus

AS and A levels, like other qualifications, have clear guidelines (known as criteria) that define how the qualification should be set up, what students need to learn and what skills they need to develop. Awarding bodies must make sure that the syllabus they design for each subject meets the rules set by the regulators. The syllabus must be approved by the regulators before schools and colleges can offer it to their students.

Setting the questions

Almost as soon as you begin your A level course, examiners are thinking about what questions will be in your final exam papers. Each exam paper takes about 18 months to prepare.

A principal examiner, appointed by the awarding body, writes the exam paper and creates a detailed explanation of how the paper should be marked. This is passed to a reviser, then to an evaluation committee and finally to an assessor.

At every stage along the way, experts check that the paper is clear, that there are no trick questions or nasty surprises, that it is of a similar standard to the previous year's paper and that it can be completed in the time allowed.



Exam day!

Once the papers have been delivered to schools it's time for you to put your knowledge, understanding and skills to the test.

If you are ready to sit your exam, but on the day something outside your control affects your performance, such as a recent illness or bereavement, you may be eligible for special consideration after the examiners have marked your paper. If you think this applies to you, speak to your teacher as soon as possible after the exam.

Special requirements

The awarding bodies aim to give all students a fair deal. They know that for some students the exam arrangements aren't suitable. For example, some students who have a disability, a learning difficulty or English as a second language may need help. If you don't think the exam arrangements are suitable for you, speak to your teachers. They'll be able to tell you more about special arrangements and advise you.

An A grade at A level is now worth 120 UCAS points and an E is worth 40

Marking the papers

It is compulsory for examiners who will mark the exam papers and the senior examiners who will check the marking process to attend what is known as a standardisation meeting. At this meeting the examiners come to an understanding of exactly how to mark the exam. They also mark a number of scripts so that their marking can be checked for accuracy and consistency.

After the standardisation meeting, examiners mark another set of papers. These are also checked. If the marking is not up to standard, the examiner undergoes further training or is not retained by the awarding body. If this happens the papers are given to another examiner. Further checks throughout the marking process ensure that you get the grades your work deserves.

Experienced examiners may mark between 300 and 400 scripts each exam season. They are not allowed to have any connection with the school, college or students whose scripts they are marking.

After all the scripts have been marked and returned to the awarding body, more sampling checks are carried out. Individual exam papers are checked to ensure that all the marks have been added up correctly.

Setting the grades

Once all the marking is complete, an awarding meeting takes place. This is when the marks needed for each grade are decided. (This is known as setting the grade boundaries.) This is also when awarding bodies ensure that standards have been and will be maintained. Guidelines set by the regulators are carefully followed to

make each decision. Exam papers from previous years and papers from the current year, as well as expert judgement and technical and statistical information, are used to judge where the grade boundaries should be set.

After the awarding meeting the accountable officer (a very senior person in each awarding body) considers the senior examiner's recommendation. Usually he or she accepts the recommended grade boundaries. If an accountable officer wishes to move the grade boundaries, there must be sufficient evidence for this decision and the senior examiner has to agree to the change. If the accountable officer and senior examiner disagree, this must be reported and explained to the regulator.



Results!

This is the day you've been waiting for!

UCAS and the universities get the results a few days before schools. This gives them enough time to make arrangements for those who are able to take up offers of a place at university.

Perhaps you've decided that after finishing your A levels you would like to find a job or travel the world. If you've decided that university is not for you, then having A level qualifications will be an advantage in your future career. They are highly valued by employers.

If you want to find out more about how A level marks relate to grades then see the 'How do marks become grades?' section on page 10.

What next?

If you aren't happy with your results and feel that something may have been done incorrectly, don't worry – you can take action. You need to contact your school or college immediately. They can request your exam papers from the awarding body so that you can see how your papers have been marked. But don't expect comments telling you where you went wrong! Your school or college can also request your paper be re-marked or the marks added up again. If you are still unhappy and think that the awarding body hasn't followed the correct procedures, then your school or college can appeal to the awarding body. Once all other routes have been exhausted, your school or college can take your appeal to the independent Examinations Appeals Board.

Resits

It is possible to resit each AS and A2 unit, but it is worth remembering that not all units are available to take in January.

'Cashing in'

'Cashing in' is the process of turning your unit marks into final AS or A level grades. If you are happy with your results and you applied to cash in when you entered the exam, you don't need to do anything at all. If you are happy with your results but didn't apply to cash in when you entered the exam, don't worry – you can still cash in. September is when you normally need to apply to cash in, but speak to your teacher to find out the exact deadline.

If you aren't happy with your results and you applied to cash in when you entered the exam, you can decline your AS grade. But remember that you must do this within the deadline. Your teacher will know the exact date. You can then try to improve your grade by resitting one or more units.

If you accept your AS grade you can still resit your AS units. You won't be able to use these results to improve your AS grade, but they will count towards your full A level.

If you are unsure about what to do speak to your teachers – they'll be able to help you.

how do marks become grades?

Look at any results slip and you will see that an AS qualification has a maximum of 300 marks from the three different AS units.

In some subjects, the three units will be worth 100 marks each. In others, the marks available for each unit are slightly different. This is also the case for A2 units.

Each exam paper is unique and so the difficulty of the exam may vary slightly from year to year.

Senior examiners in each subject judge the difficulty of each paper by looking at a sample of candidates' work and exam papers from the current year and previous years, examiners' reports and statistical data. They use their professional judgement to decide on the grade boundaries for each paper, using what are called 'raw marks'.

For example, you might need 40 raw marks out of 50 for an A grade one year, but 42 out of 50 the next.

To make the unit results compatible and comparable (so that they can be added together to get the final grade, even if they were taken at different times), raw marks from the examiners are converted to points on the uniform mark scale (UMS).



What is UMS?

On the UMS, the range of marks for a particular grade is the same each year (unlike the range of raw marks for each grade).

The range covered by the UMS varies between units. For a unit out of 100, the ranges of UMS marks for each grade are: E – 40–49; D – 50–59; C – 60–69; B – 70–79; A – 80–100. The raw mark grade boundaries are then translated into fixed points on the uniform mark scale.

So, for example, if the examiners decided that a raw mark of 90 out of 120 on a unit was the lowest mark for an A grade then that 90 raw mark would become 80 when translated into the UMS

mark out of 100. If your raw mark lies between the A and B grade boundaries then the proportion of marks you get within the range for that grade is calculated.

If the raw mark needed for a B this year was between 80 and 90 and you got 85 marks, you are halfway up that range. Your UMS mark is then halfway up the 70–80 UMS range, which equals 75 marks. (The score conversion diagram might make this clearer.) The UMS marks for individual units are then added together to give an overall UMS mark for the subject as a whole. The maximum total UMS mark is always 300 for AS levels and 600 for A levels.

Score conversion diagram

	Raw mark	→	UMS mark
Full marks	120	→	100
A grade	90	→	80
Your mark	85	→	75
B grade	80	→	70

Overall AS grade boundaries (marks out of 300) are:

Grade A:	240 marks
Grade B:	210 marks
Grade C:	180 marks
Grade D:	150 marks
Grade E:	120 marks

Overall A level grade boundaries (marks out of 600) are:

Grade A:	480 marks
Grade B:	420 marks
Grade C:	360 marks
Grade D:	300 marks
Grade E:	240 marks

examine the examiner

Have you ever wondered what examiners are like or what they are looking for when they mark your paper? We tracked down an examiner to get some honest answers to those burning questions...

» How did you become an examiner? Is it a full-time job?

Most examiners are teachers or lecturers who get paid for marking scripts. It's time-consuming, but many say that marking papers helps them become better teachers. Thanks to being an examiner, I know more about assessment, so I can pass that on to my students.

» Aren't examiners just trying to catch you out?

Just the opposite, in fact. We're trained to make sure everyone gets the marks they deserve.

» What do you want to see in a paper? Should students include a bit of humour, for example?

Not unless you're taking A level comedy! Take your lead on language and tone from the question. As a general rule, avoid heavy use of slang and don't sound too chatty. We like to see that you've really answered the question that was asked – not just the question that you were hoping for. We can tell when good answers have been planned, not just attacked, and when points are backed up with well-chosen examples. We read a lot of papers so we love it when one really stands out. When a paper shows a proper grasp of the subject, it's great.

» Do you know a grade A paper when you read one?

Yes and no. I know if an answer is strong and will give it high marks accordingly, but it's only once all the marks are in that the exam board sets the grade boundaries for each paper and decides what mark equals an A and so on.

» Do exam boards work to a quota of passes and grades?

No, there are no set numbers for any grades. Students are awarded the grades they have earned.

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a white button-down shirt, is shown in profile, looking down and writing on a document with a blue pen. The background is a bright, out-of-focus window. In the bottom right corner, there is a large white number '13'.

**» What about handwriting?
Mine gets a bit dodgy when
I rush...**

We try to read what we can, but if we can't understand your handwriting, your mark might be affected. But you should know that we're after good answers, not long ones. It sounds obvious but good spelling, grammar and punctuation will also improve your chances of getting a higher grade – marks depend on them.

Around 50,000 examiners are needed to mark 26 million exam scripts and pieces of coursework submitted by students each year

what they say

Ever wondered what people think of A levels? Read on to find out why professionals from business, education and universities think A levels are valuable qualifications.

George Cox
*Director General of the
Institute of Directors*

Employers know that A levels involve very demanding exams and recognise the work that has to go into their achievement. That is why good results provide a sound basis for a career or future learning. We wish you every success and assure you that your hard work will be worthwhile.

Universities UK
*Representing universities
in the UK*

Successful completion of A levels (or their equivalent) is a passport to a world of opportunity, both in higher education and beyond. There are around 55,000 undergraduate university courses and many students apply for these on the basis of their A level performance.

Universities and higher education colleges consider A levels to be key indicators of achievement and potential. They are important tools in admissions decisions although, of course, universities take into account a range of factors, including a candidate's personal statement and reference on the UCAS form.

High achievement at A level is well regarded by universities and employers alike. Indeed, the knowledge and transferable skills gained through A levels (and later, in higher education) are vital to many careers. Many career pathways are now dependent on higher education qualifications.

Universities UK believes it is important to look at ways to optimise the UK's educational system and alongside other



stakeholders is supporting the work of the review group on 14–19 Reform. Whatever shape the new system eventually takes, we must ensure that it builds on the strengths of the existing system.

We wish all students the best of luck in their forthcoming exams, and urge them to consider the many opportunities and benefits higher education offers.

Ken Boston

Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Following a great deal of hard work in your GCSE, AS or A level course you are now on the home straight towards your exams. Gaining these qualifications is a great achievement on your part.

QCA, CCEA, ACCAC and the awarding bodies have been working together to ensure that the summer exams run smoothly and all results are delivered on time. We continually maintain the most rigorous standards to ensure that you receive the grades you deserve.

A levels are a world-class qualification. They are well established and a recognised achievement both in the UK and abroad, understood and valued by both employers and higher education.

We appreciate Mike Tomlinson's recent report into 14–19 education in England and welcome his suggestions and plans. His priority, and ours, is always to safeguard the best interests of students. Regardless of any future changes made to the exam system, A levels will always retain their world-renowned value and credibility.

Your hard work and determination to succeed are appreciated by employers, people in higher education and your teachers and families.

I wish you well with your studies.

Mike Tomlinson

Head of the 14–19 working group in England

You may have seen newspaper stories about plans to replace A levels in England with a new-style diploma. You may even be wondering about the value of the exams you are about to take and whether A level qualifications will be worth having in the future.

The reality is that A levels are important qualifications, recognised for their quality throughout the world. They reward two years of intensive study and are the main qualifications for young people who want to go on to university, further study or employment.

The changes that my working group have suggested build on the A level system, keeping its greatest strengths and adapting it to meet changing needs. Any major redesign of the education system will take about 10 years to put fully into place; there will not be any fundamental changes in the next few years.

You work hard to gain AS and A levels and I would like to take this opportunity to wish you luck in your exams this year. You are working towards a qualification that is world class and will be of great value to you in your future study or employment.



move on



A+
Chemical Reactions

W. 10/10/10

you've got your results. what next?

If you have been successful in your application to university, you will have been given an offer or offers (on a 'conditional' or 'unconditional' basis). If you have offers your next step depends upon your position in UCAS.

If you have conditional offers, check your results.

- ▶ **If you meet the conditions of the offer**, you are guaranteed a place. You need do nothing more. Your university or college will automatically confirm your place. UCAS will send you an AS12 letter with a reply slip. You need to send the reply slip to your institution within 14 days.

- ▶ **If you do not meet the conditions of the offer** your university or college may still accept you. Check your position on ucastrack, which will be available after 11am on results day. If you have been accepted, you do not need to do anything. Wait for a letter from UCAS. However, if you are turned down, you automatically become eligible for UCAS Clearing (see below). If there is no decision it could be worth ringing your university or college.

If you do not have offers (or fail to meet the conditions of your offers) you automatically become eligible for UCAS Clearing. Vacancies are published in *The Independent* newspaper and on the UCAS website www.ucas.com. You need to telephone universities or colleges direct to try to gain a place, which will then be ratified through the clearing process.

You need to understand your own position. If in doubt, access ucastrack on the UCAS website www.ucas.com, using your application number and password. This website will be available after 11am on results day.

For information on clearing, go to the UCAS website. UCAS customer advisers are available on 0870 1122211. During clearing, careers advisers trained by One Life are on 0808 100 8000.

(Information supplied by UCAS)

where to go for help

There is no need to deal with worries on your own. Support and advice are always available.

► **Teachers** will be able to give you advice on a whole range of issues, from revision techniques to career or university choices.

► **Organisations** are also able to offer help and support:

www.qca.org.uk

Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system; includes online version of this guide.

www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications

All the information you need on qualifications.

www.connexions.gov.uk

Free advice and counselling for 13- to 19-year-olds on everything from revision and stress to higher education options; call their helpline on 080 800 13219 or textline on 07766 413 219.

www.aimhigher.ac.uk

Lots of information on university life and careers.

www.learndirect.co.uk

Help in finding the right courses; call them free on 0800 100 900.

www.need2know.co.uk

Information and advice from the Department for Education and Skills on everything from qualifications to jobs, and loads more.

www.jcq.org.uk

The Joint Council for Qualifications; visit here for post-results services booklet.

www.theeab.org.uk

Information about exams appeals process.

www.ucas.ac.uk

Universities and colleges admissions service; track your application progress here.

For more copies

Write to: A Level Guide, QCA, 83 Piccadilly, London W1J 8QA

Telephone: 01787 884444

Email: alevel@qca.org.uk

Order ref: QCA/04/1295

This guide to AS and A levels was produced by the regulatory authorities QCA, ACCAC and CCEA.

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Qualifications and Curriculum Authority



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