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A-level economics

New specifications

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The new A-levels: the headlines

This note focuses on the full, linear A-level specifications, and not the new, standalone AS specifications. The A-level must include all of the AS content and the AS exams are drawn from a subset of that content, albeit assessed at 'A-level standard'.

The *DfE subject content for economics* specifies the knowledge, understanding, skills and assessment objectives that are common to all A-level economics specifications:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/302106/A_level_economics_subject_content.pdf

Specifications from all the examining boards are required to follow this common framework. The key common changes are:

- new core content relating to the financial sector and the role of the central bank
- more explicit treatment of the need for awareness of the historical context of economic ideas and theories
- quantitative skills

The common core does not prescribe the whole content of the specification, leaving room for the exam boards to offer distinctive approaches. Two of the three boards chose to introduce some elements of marginal utility theory, and all make reference to rationalist/behavioural approaches, although to different degrees. The new common core encourages greater awareness of development issues, which is apparent in two of the three specifications where this was less strongly emphasised previously.

All three boards have designed the specification content in such a way as to allow for co-teaching of AS alongside the full A-level. In some minor topic areas, sequencing issues may require AS students to be exposed to some concepts only needed at A-level.

Perhaps the most radical change has been with the OCR specification, which has moved away from its previous focus (in A2) on a choice of modules on the economics of work and leisure or transport economics. The new structure enables a more flexible approach to covering topical and important issues that students will meet.

The assessment objectives

The assessment objectives are set by Ofqual and are common across the boards. For A-level economics these are as follows:

		Weightings in A-level			
		Ofqual permitted range	AQA	Edexcel	OCR
AO1	Demonstrate knowledge of terms/concepts and theories/models to show an understanding of the behaviour of economic agents and how they are affected by and respond to economic issues	20–30%	20–23%	22–24%	25%
AO2	Apply knowledge and understanding to various economic contexts to show how economic agents are affected by and respond to economic issues	20–30%	26–29%	22–24%	25%
AO3	Analyse issues within economics, showing an understanding of their impact on economic agents	20–30%	26–29%	26–28%	25%
AO4	Evaluate economic arguments and use qualitative and quantitative evidence to support informed judgements relating to economic issues	20–30%	22–25%	26–28%	25%

Quantitative skills

The DfE Subject Content for Economics also specifies the quantitative skills to be developed:

- calculate, use and understand ratios and fractions
- calculate, use and understand percentages and percentage changes
- understand and use the terms mean, median and relevant quantiles
- construct and interpret a range of standard graphical forms
- calculate and interpret index numbers
- calculate cost, revenue and profit (marginal, average, totals)
- make calculations to convert from money to real terms
- make calculations of elasticity and interpret the result
- interpret, apply and analyse information in written, graphical and numerical forms

All three boards have designed their specifications to foster these, which must comprise 20% of the overall marks for the qualification. In addition, Edexcel has added:

- distinguish between changes in the level of a variable, and the rate of change
- understand composite indicators
- understand the meaning of seasonally adjusted figures

These do not count towards the 20% requirement for quantitative skills in the overall assessment.

The new specifications: content and skills

What stays the same and what changes?

The new common core requires all boards to make adjustments to the content of their specifications. They have chosen to do so in different ways. The most change is with OCR, which has taken the opportunity to restructure its content to remove the previous optional module arrangement.

The following table sets out the major changes, but does not attempt to cover some of the minor detailed tweaks that have been made.

AQA	Edexcel	OCR
New content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial sector • The role of the central bank • Behavioural economics • Introduction to utility theory • Monopolistic competition 	New content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial sector • The role of the central bank • Introduction to behavioural economics • More reference to economic history & economic thinkers 	New content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial sector • The role of the central bank • Rationality and behavioural issues • Introduction to utility theory • The environment • Debates in macroeconomic thinking
Revised content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More on nature of development 	Revised content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More on emerging economies 	Revised content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More on development
Deleted content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost–benefit analysis • Growth of firms • Game theory • Buffer stocks 	Deleted content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Union details • Labour immobility/price instability as market failures 	Deleted content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on leisure and transport economics (former option modules)

In all of the specifications, the need to extend the coverage of financial markets and the expanding role of the central bank has put pressure on other areas of analysis, which has offered opportunities for reframing the content of the specifications.

The new material brought into the syllabus content will improve the topicality and currency of the qualification, and the emphasis on quantitative skills and criticality will prepare students for study beyond A-level or for entering the workplace.

The new specifications: assessment

The boards have adopted similar structures for the assessment. Students will face three 2-hour written examinations which together comprise the A-level assessment. In each case, the third paper is synoptic, spanning micro and macro issues.

Modes of assessment differ between the Boards, as follows:

AQA

Paper 1: Markets and market failure

Section A: a choice of 1 from 2 data response questions (40 marks)

Section B: A choice of 1 from 3 essay questions (40 marks)

Paper 2: The national and international economy

Section A: a choice of 1 from 2 data response questions (40 marks)

Section B: A choice of 1 from 3 essay questions (40 marks)

Paper 3: Economic principles and issues

Section A: Multiple choice questions (30 marks)

Section B: Case study (50 marks)

Edexcel

Paper 1: Markets and business behaviour

Section A: Multiple choice and short-answer questions

Section B: Data response

Section C: A choice of 1 from 2 extended open response questions

Paper 2: The national and global economy

Section A: Multiple choice and short-answer questions

Section B: Data response

Section C: A choice of 1 from 2 extended open response questions

Paper 3: Microeconomics and macroeconomics

The paper comprises two sections, each of which comprises one data-response question broken into a number of parts, including a choice of 1 from 2 extended open-response questions.

OCR

Paper 1: Microeconomics

Section A: Data response (30 marks)

Section B: A choice of 1 from 2 high-tariff questions (25 marks)

Section C: A choice of 1 from 2 high-tariff questions (25 marks)

Paper 2: Macroeconomics

Section A: Data response (30 marks)

Section B: A choice of 1 from 2 high-tariff questions (25 marks)

Section C: A choice of 1 from 2 high-tariff questions (25 marks)

Paper 3: Themes in economics

Section A: Multiple choice questions (30 marks)

Section B: A series of short answer and extended response questions based on an unseen theme. (50 marks)

What the REVIEW provides for the new specifications

Content

- Articles covering key topics in the specifications
- Featured coverage of new content such as financial markets and behavioural economics
- Up-to-date analysis of trends in the national and global economy

Quantitative skills

- A new regular feature in the magazine that explains what is meant by quantitative skills, and how to use them
- Worked examples of using quantitative skills
- Articles that show how quantitative skills can be applied.

Independent learning with the Online Archive

- Hundreds of past articles on key A-level topics for students to develop their research skills
- Recent back issues include extra resources such as weblinks, posters and videos

Assessment

- Regular discussion of assessment materials
- Advice and guidance on how to tackle questions
- Feature articles to include questions that get students thinking

Stretch and challenge

- Feature articles that get students thinking like economists
- Additional online explanations of issues that puzzle students
- Articles dealing with topical issues in new ways

Excitement ...

- IFS researchers writing for A-level students on current issues in UK economic policy
- Interviews with well-known economists
- Topics in the news explained for A-level

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Visit www.hoddereducation.co.uk/ALevelEconomics for all the latest information on our print and digital resources for AQA, OCR and Edexcel.

Philip Allan CPD events and online seminars to prepare for the new specifications

- **Understanding the new 2015 linear AQA A-level economics specification and methods of assessment** with **James Powell** and **Ray Powell**

London: 18 March 2015 Manchester: 4 March 2015

- **Delivering the new Edexcel (A) A-level economics specification** with **Quintin Brewer** and **Rachel Cole**

London: 24 March 2015 Manchester: 25 March 2015

- **Preparing to teach the new OCR A-level economics specification** with **Sam Dobin**

London: 17 March 2015

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