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O's and A's and Other Letters of the Alphabet: Making Sense of British-Based Secondary and Pre-University Level Qualifications

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I. Ordinary (O), Advanced Subsidiary (AS), and Advanced (A) Levels in the UK

Background

The O and A Level examination certificates are the secondary and pre-university credentials in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The O Levels, or Ordinary Levels, typically represent a total of 11 years of study and mark the end of the secondary education cycle. Students take examinations in their chosen subject areas. For consideration as successful completion, usually a minimum of five subject passes are needed.

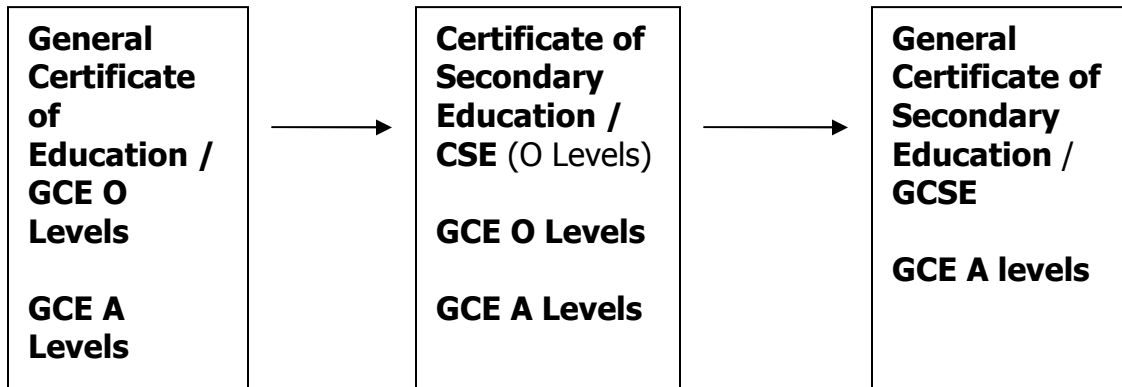
Students can proceed to the A Levels, a pre-university qualification requiring an additional two years of study and leading to a total of 13. The first "half" of an A Level is the AS Level, which comes after one year of additional study (instead of two). This can also be a stand alone qualification if students choose to stop at this level. For eligibility for university admission, a minimum of two A Level subject passes are required.

Snapshot of O and A Levels

Name	Abbreviation	Timeframe
Ordinary Levels	O Levels	11 years of study
Advanced Subsidiary Levels	AS Levels	An additional 1 year of study
Advanced Levels	A Levels	An additional 1 year of study

O and A Levels have had many name changes, which can be some cause for confusion. Historically, they were referred to as the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O Level and the GCE A Level examinations. In the mid 1960s, the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) was separately introduced as being equivalent to the O Levels. In the mid 1980s, however, the GCE O Levels and CSE boards merged to offer the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) instead. The GCE A Levels were retained.

Evolution of O and A Level Terminology



(The current nomenclature, then, would be the GCSE and the GCE A Levels. However, for ease of reference, we will continue using O and A Level terminology.)

In 1987, Advanced Supplementary Levels (AS Levels) were introduced as “half” an A Level. Around 2000, they were phased out when the A Levels were revised and split into two parts: the Advanced Subsidiary (AS Level) and the A2 (A Level). Successful completion of both components leads to the award of the A Levels. (In contrast, the old Advanced Supplementary Levels were not a prerequisite to or a required component of the A Levels.)

Examining Boards

Previously, there were over thirty awarding bodies that offered the O and A Levels. The number has now reduced to five in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, many due to amalgamations which have occurred. They are the following:

- Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)
A result of the merger between the Associated Examining Board and the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board in 2000
- Edexcel
A result of the merger between the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and London Examinations in 1996
- Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
A result of the merger between the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) and the Royal Society of Arts in 1998
- Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC)
- Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

Because the awarding bodies can vary, there may be variations in the actual examination questions, as well as the range of subjects being offered (as an example, Latin is only offered by OCR as an examination subject). However, the skills and

knowledge being assessed are the same, as are the standards among the examining boards. Four of the awarding bodies – AQA, CCEA, Edexcel, and OCR – are regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual), whereas WJEC is regulated separately by the authorities in Wales. Ofqual sets the subject criteria and the examining bodies must submit the syllabi and marking scheme for approval. The boards are also members of the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), which ensures consistency and regulation.

Schools may choose to use a combination of different examining boards, based on the syllabi and subjects they wish to provide for their students.

Cambridge Pre-University Diploma

University of Cambridge International Examinations (sister organization of OCR, under the umbrella organization of the Cambridge Assessment Group) has recently developed an alternative to the A Levels, known as the Cambridge Pre-University Diploma. This qualification also follows a two-year program of study. However, the syllabus is designed to be more comprehensive and linear, so students take exams at the end of the whole course. The aim of this program is to facilitate a smoother transition between school and university-level study. Toward this end, it was developed with five required components:

- 3 principal subjects
- an independent research project which supports interdisciplinary enquiry
- Global Perspectives: a series of seminars that explore current world challenges (within ethics, environment, economics, technology, and politics and culture)

Students can also sit for the one-year Short Courses (usually after the first year) in a number of modern languages. The first cohort for the Cambridge Pre-U will be examined in June 2010. The short courses were first examined in 2009.

II. International O and A Levels

Background

The O and A Levels can also be found in many countries outside the UK. They are offered in many Commonwealth countries, such as in the Caribbean and Anglophone nations in Africa. While most of these areas have now developed their own local qualifications, secondary school leavers still have opportunities to pursue O and A Levels as an alternative route, particularly if they are intending to pursue higher education abroad. O and A Level certificates are not limited to only the Commonwealth countries, but can be also be found in international schools around the world. Wherever the studies are taken, they are usually assessed and validated by the appropriate UK examining bodies. (A local ministry or board, however, may assist with the administration of the examinations.)

While these qualifications are referred to as GCSE and GCE A Levels in the UK, the “old” names have been retained for some of the international versions. As such, they are still commonly referred to as GCE O Levels and GCE A Levels. University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) offers both GCE O and A Levels internationally. Currently, Edexcel also offers GCE O Levels internationally, although they are in the process of phasing these out in favor of the IGCSEs (see further below).

CIE now offers several other alternatives to the O and A Levels, with curricula that are less Anglo-centric and more suited to meet the needs of a diverse, multi-cultural student population (e.g., offering more languages as subject options).

IGCSE

In the late 1980s, University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) established the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) as an alternative to the O Levels. It is now offered in over 120 countries and usually represents a total of 11 years of study. It should be noted that Edexcel also offers a version of the IGCSE for countries outside the UK.

HIGCSE

The Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE) is specific to the region of Southern Africa. The HIGCSE is an 11+1 qualification that is pitched at the same level as South Africa’s National Senior Certificate. It was introduced in 1995 in countries with 11-year school systems, primarily for students seeking opportunities for higher education in nearby South Africa. It is recognized by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) and can be used as an accepted entrance requirement for universities in this country. The HIGCSE is now being phased out, as countries like Namibia have developed their own qualifications which are awarded after 12 years of study.

COSC and COHSC

The Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) and the Cambridge Overseas Higher School Certificate (COHSC) were also developed as alternatives to the O and A Levels, respectively. They are offered in a number of African nations (e.g., Lesotho and Mauritius) as well as in Macau. Several countries that previously offered these examinations now have local examinations that were developed in conjunction with the Cambridge Assessment Group.

ICE and AICE

In the early 1990s, University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) also developed the International Certificate of Education (ICE) and Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE).

The ICE is a group award, requiring successful performance on a minimum of seven IGCSE subjects from the following groups:

- Group I – Languages
- Group II – Humanities and Social Sciences
- Group III – Sciences
- Group IV – Mathematics
- Group V – Creative, Technical and Vocational

The subjects must, at minimum, be comprised of two languages in Group I and one from each of the four remaining groups.

Like the ICE, the Advanced Certificate of Education Cambridge AICE is a group award and requires a combination of A / AS Levels in three areas – (1) Mathematics and Science, (2) Languages, and (3) Arts and Humanities. In order to earn the AICE, students must earn six credits with at least one course coming from each of the three areas. Each A Level is worth 2 credits, whereas an AS Level is worth 1 credit. Candidates who are unable to earn the required six credits still receive GCE certificates for their A and AS Levels.

A pilot of the AICE ran in the state of Florida between 1997 and 2000. It is now a graduation option for high school students in Florida.

III. Websites

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

Edexcel: www.edexcel.com

Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ): www.jcq.org.uk

Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA):
www.rewardinglearning.org.uk

Office of Qualifications and Examinations (Ofqual): www.ofqual.gov.uk

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

University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE): www.cie.org.uk

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