

Russell Group response

16-19 Accountability Consultation

Question 6. Do you agree that the measures set out in annexes A and B should be the top line and additional data published for students studying at levels one, two and three?

1. AAB measure in three facilitating subjects

1.1. We welcome the publication of information that will help students and their parents make good choices about their place of study post-16 and that will help those who wish to study at university achieve that ambition. We agree A-level choices really matter. Too few students realise that some subjects and subject combinations can keep open wider degree course options at leading universities.

1.2. However, it continues to be the Russell Group's view¹ that this indicator of achievement should not be used as 'shorthand' for a measure of the number of pupils in a school who are qualified to apply successfully to a Russell Group university. We do not feel the Department's rationale for the inclusion of this measure, or the way it has been communicated to schools, has been clear or consistent, which has contributed to this misunderstanding:

(a) In the Department's 2012 statement of intent regarding the inclusion of facilitating subjects as a measure in the performance table it is stated² that:

“In particular, we will publish percentages of students achieving three A levels at grades AAB or higher in facilitating subjects, reflecting the subjects and grades most commonly required by Russell Group and other top universities.”

(b) In the schools' 2012 September checking guidance it was stated:

¹ <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/russell-group-latest-news/154-2013/5429-alevel-indicators-in-school-league-tables/>

² http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download/Statement_of_Intent_2012.pdf

“The 2012 Key Stage 5 performance tables will include the percentages of students achieving three A levels at grades AAB or higher in facilitating subjects, reflecting the subjects and grades that can be required by Russell Group universities.”

(c) In the document for this consultation, it is stated that:

“As part of the additional measures at level 3 we propose to retain the AAB measure for A levels in ‘facilitating subjects’, introduced in the 2012 Performance Tables. This measure shows the percentage of students achieving three A levels at grades AAB or higher in two and in three facilitating subjects. These measures are designed specifically to help students to focus on the combinations of courses that are most likely to support progression to highly valued destinations post-19.”

- 1.3. The facilitating subjects are the subjects most commonly required for entry to degree courses at Russell Group universities. In our guide *Informed Choices* we advise that students unsure of what they want to study at university should consider choosing two of these subjects, to keep their options open. It is important that students make decisions based on their individual circumstances. We encourage all prospective students to check the entry requirements for their chosen course before applying to a particular university.
- 1.4. We are very concerned that this measure has distracted and detracted from the guidance we have produced in *Informed Choices*, and led to the misapprehension that only A-levels in facilitating subjects are valued by Russell Group universities.
- 1.5. Certain degree courses will require three facilitating subjects, very many require one or two, and some have no subject specific requirements. Therefore it is not the case that you must study three facilitating subjects to gain entry to a Russell Group university.
- 1.6. As we conveyed to officials at the time this measure was first introduced, we saw many risks associated it. Since its publication many of these risks have been realised, and the reporting of this measure in the media has been confused and unhelpful.³
- 1.7. We remain concerned that students studying other subject combinations may be put off applying, mistakenly assuming that they cannot apply without

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21162960>,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/russell-group-universities-accused-of-killing-key-subjects-such-as-economics-and-the-arts-at-secondary-school-level-8475784.html>,
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2267899/A-quarter-schools-A-level-pupils-grades-academic-subjects.html>

qualifications in three facilitating subjects. This may particularly be true for students who choose to study A-level subjects which are not commonly taught at Key Stage 4, but that are taught at degree level, such as Psychology and Economics.

- 1.8. Conversely, there is also a danger that students assume that any three facilitating subjects are suitable for entry to any course at any Russell Group university, when in fact many of our courses have specific subject requirements, and one of our key messages on subject choice is that students who know what they want to study at university should check the entry requirements for specific courses and institutions. It would be unfortunate if students closed off options they had wanted to keep open, because they assumed that any three subjects from this list would be appropriate for entry.
- 1.9. We are also concerned that the measure may suggest that AAB is a common minimum entry requirement across all Russell Group universities. Some courses and some institutions have minimum entry requirements above AAB so it would be dangerous for students or schools to assume that this is 'good enough', but at the same time there are courses with lower minimum thresholds so we would not want students who expect to achieve grades lower than AAB to be discouraged from applying.
- 1.10. Furthermore, the Higher Education Student Number Controls for England set by HEFCE have now changed so that there is a threshold of grades ABB above which numbers are uncontrolled, so it is not clear why grades AAB should still be set as the measure of attainment.

2. AAB measure in two Facilitating Subjects

- 2.1. As regards the 'two facilitating subjects' measure, we are concerned about the Department's use of *Informed Choices* in the consultation document to explain the rationale behind its inclusion. The following statement from the consultation document is problematic to us:

“...allows recognition of achievement in a third subject that has not been defined as “facilitating” but is also highly rated by top universities. Examples of these subjects are given in the Russell Group’s “Informed Choices” document (e.g. Economics, Religious Studies and Welsh). These important subjects could be counted as the third A level subject and we plan to monitor the take up of these subjects.”
- 2.2. We are unclear which other important subjects the Department is referring to, and which subjects the Department would not 'count' as the third A-level. It is difficult to see how this would work in practice. *Informed Choices* includes a section on 'subjects required and useful for certain degrees', but the useful subjects vary

considerably depending on the degree course. There is not a Russell Group 'highly rated but not facilitating' list of subjects.

- 2.3. *Informed Choices* covers admissions from UK schools to Russell Group universities, so it was appropriate to include reference to Welsh, which is studied at A-level by many students in Welsh schools. However, it is peculiar that the Department has chosen to list Welsh A-level as an important subject for schools in England.

3. Mathematics

- 3.1. We note the Department's intention to show attainment of approved Level 3 mathematics qualifications in the performance tables. Russell Group universities require Maths A-level or AS-level, and sometimes Further Maths, for many of our degree courses, particularly for science subjects, engineering, economics and of course Maths itself. It is vital that any new mathematics qualifications do not have a negative impact on the take-up of A-level and AS-level Maths. We would be concerned if the inclusion of attainment in Core Maths in the performance tables incentivised schools to encourage students to study Core Maths at the expense of AS and A-Level Maths. The recent increases in students taking A-level Maths are welcome, and we would want to see that trend continue.

November 2013