

Cultural Learning Alliance

Briefing: History of Art A-level Closure

01/11/16

Over the last few weeks we have seen a great deal of press about the decision by Examination Board AQA to close the History of Art A-level, including articles in [The Times](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-prayer-for-art-history-gpbbb6xft), [The Telegraph](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/studying-history-of-art-is-more-than-a-posh-hobby/), and the [Independent](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/art-history-a-level-dropped-creative-subjects-aqa-gove-a7359436.html). This briefing aims to give you some the facts and figures behind it all.

**What is the current picture?**

History of Art A Level is only offered by one exam-board: AQA.

The numbers of young people taking the qualification have always been comparatively very small:

In 2016 **839**students took the full A Level and **721** took the AS Level  
In comparison **43,242** students took Art and Design A Levels in 2016, and **41,545** took AS Level; **54,731** took History A Level and**61,304** took History AS Level

The full numbers can be seen at the bottom of this briefing.

A 2014 Guardian [article](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/04/art-history-not-posh-visual-toolkit)suggests that the breakdown of private schools vs independent schools that offer the A Level is as follows:

*‘A Level History of Art is offered at only 17 state secondary schools out of more than 3,000, plus a further 15 sixth-form colleges. By contrast, over 90 fee-paying schools offer the subject.’*

In the [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/munira-mirza/saving-art-history_b_12494488.html) [15 October 2016] Munira Mirza puts it at 16 state schools and 90 private schools.

University History of Art courses do not require History of Art as an A Level for entry.

**Why is AQA axing the subject?**

AQA is claiming that it is axing the subject for commercial reasons; it cannot make the subject profitable due to the small numbers, and because the specialist nature of the subject makes it hard to find experienced examiners. You can read their full statement [here](http://www.aqa.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/policy/gcse-and-a-level-changes/background-to-new-as-and-a-levels).

The decision is coming from the exam board and not from the government or Ofqual. In contrast, Creative Writing as an A Level is being axed because the DfE says it ‘has not been possible to draft subject content in accordance with its guidance, and Ofqual's principles for reformed AS and A Levels’.

A large number of the articles on the subject have blamed Michael Gove’s reforms for the removal of the subject. He himself has taken to [Twitter](http://https//www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/gove-axeing-art-history-a-level-not-my-fault)to claim this is not the case (as reported in the TES)

The excellent National Society of Education in Art and Design has put out this [statement](http://www.nsead.org/news/news.aspx?id=722),  and the Association of Art Historians has issued this [press release](http://www.aah.org.uk/media/docs/AAH%20%20RELEASE_13October.pdf) in which it states:

*‘The decision to discontinue History of Art at Key Stage 5 will mark a significant loss to young people’s access to - and understanding of - a range of different cultures, artefacts and ideas. Signposting educational opportunities, such as an A level in art history to students who may never have considered this an opportunity, has also formed a significant part of our campaign work’*

**What is the wider picture?**

A Level Art History has not been the direct victim of government policy intervention, but it is fair to say that the policy and practical climate is not one that encourages wider arts education to flourish. In fact, we are currently at a moment of crisis for the arts in schools.

21% fewer arts GCSEs were taken in 2016 compared to 2010, while the number of children in the cohort only declined by 6%. There is also evidence that the decline in studying arts subjects post-14 is gathering speed, with an 8% fall in the numbers entered between 2015 and 2016. Between 2010 and 2015 the number of hours the arts were taught in secondary schools, and the number of arts teachers, both fell by 15%.

The reasons for this decline are complex. The Introduction of the English Baccalaureate at GCSE and as a headline school accountability measure has sent a clear message to schools, teachers, parents and students that the arts don’t count and are not valued by government. Read our EBacc[briefing](http://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/manifesto) for full details.

Student teachers in arts disciplines tend not to be [eligible for bursaries](http://https//www.gov.uk/guidance/funding-initial-teacher-training-itt-academic-year-2016-to-17)to train (with the exception of Design and Technology and Music – and these are very much smaller than the bursaries for Physics, Maths and Chemistry). Although there are places offered in arts teacher training, many of these are left unfilled.

There has been a recent change to policy whereby AS Levels and A Levels have been uncoupled: students used to be able to do an AS year as a taster and then go on to a year of further study to complete the full A-level. Now this is no longer the case, it means that students are much more risk-averse in their choices.

The Department for Education is clear that it ’makes no apology’ for weighting the system in this way.

In a [speech](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-social-justice-case-for-an-academic-curriculum) in June 2015 Minister for Schools Nick Gibb said:

*“It has also been suggested that our emphasis on academic subjects in the national curriculum, and especially the introduction of the EBacc, ‘crowds out’ the study of other important subjects, particularly the arts.*

*We should acknowledge that the curriculum always involves trade-offs: more time on one subject means less time on others. Over the years, I’ve been asked to add scores of subjects –  from intellectual property, to Esperanto, to den building – to the national curriculum. Many of these are important and interesting.*

*The question, though, is always whether they are sufficiently important to justify reducing the time available for the existing subjects in the curriculum, and I make no apology for protecting space for the English Baccalaureate subjects wherever possible.”*

Art History A Level is the victim of market forces, but we have to ask whether educational choices should be determined by the market. All young people need to be given the widest possible opportunity to engage with a broad and balanced education, and disciplines like Art History enable them to be rigorous, critical and curious, using a frame that they may not have encountered before and enabling them to access the cultural capital that art history offers. As long as the breadth of study at A-level is determined by commercial factors, we either have to invest in raising awareness and demand for the arts, and/or we have to call for subjects with smaller uptake to be subsidised.

**AQA figures only: 2010 to 2016**

Art History A Level

2010:     908  
2011:     897  
2012:     976  
2013:     760  
2014:     824  
2015:     769  
2016:     839

Art History AS Level

2010:     913  
2011:     1055  
2012:     919  
2013:     866  
2014:     821  
2015:     902  
2016:     721