

6 September 2013

Professor Nigel Thrift  
Vice Chancellor  
University of Warwick

Dear Professor Thrift,

We write to you in your role as Chair of the newly constituted ALCAB group with reference to an anomaly concerning the reform of English A levels.

In the letter of 21.3.13 from Glenys Stacey, Head of Ofqual, to the Secretary of State for Education (and copied to you), the following definition of the English A levels is given (relevant phrase in bold below):

‘You have said that you would like A levels in the “facilitating” subjects except languages – **English (language, literature and language & literature)**, mathematics and further mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history and geography – to be developed for 2015, and we have agreed this with the exam boards. This aligns with the GCSE subjects being reformed to the same timescale, and promotes coherence between the subject content for new GCSEs and A levels’.

However, in your letter of 31.5.13 to the Secretary of State, you list only English Literature as a facilitating subject. As university teachers of English Language and of Linguistics, we are very concerned by the omission of English Language from the list of facilitating subjects, and worried about the unintended consequences that already appear to be arising from this confusion over subject names and areas.

English Language A Levels have been a highly respected part of the English qualification portfolio for 30 years, offering a rigorous and transferable academic training that is easily on a par, in terms of academic challenge, with any of the facilitating subjects on the list. English Language A2 was taken by 24,368 students in 2012; another 16,391 took A2 Language and Literature; together they account for 45% of the students taking English A Levels. The A levels are recommended, even required, by many Russell Group universities for relevant courses (see Appendix below).

These students learn about many aspects of language structure and use, including grammar, phonetics and phonology, language acquisition, language change and variation. Both English Language A level, and English Language and Literature A level (the latter was also listed on many Russell Group UCAS entry requirement pages) offer strong employability routes for students entering

teaching and many other careers in business and organisations. It is of particular concern to us that, at the very point where more knowledge about language is being expected of trainee teachers, ALCAB might inadvertently be appearing to suggest that this knowledge is of lesser importance than that of English Literature.

At a time when numbers going into HEIs to study English in all its forms are under pressure from subjects that appear to offer more direct routes into employment, we are also concerned about the potential recruitment challenge we face if schools and colleges perceive English Language A level, or English Language and Literature A level, to be of lesser worth. The school sector might not continue to offer these courses; or they may discourage their high achievers from taking them. Those of us who are involved in sixth form study days and HE recruitment fairs have some anecdotal evidence to suggest that such distortions are already occurring.

We realise that your point of reference was to the Russell Group pamphlet *Informed Choices*; however, that pamphlet does not appear to have arisen from careful research into the contents of A level courses or university courses, across a range of educational providers. We would respectfully ask you and your colleagues to include all aspects of English in your consideration of A Level courses.

Sincerely,



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On behalf of

Adrian Barlow  
President, The English Association

Esther Daborn  
Chair, Committee on Linguistics in Education

David Duff  
Chair, Council for College and University English

Greg Myers  
Chair, British Association for Applied Linguistics

Appendix: **English Language** or **English Language & Linguistics** in entry requirements to Russell Group universities. (Most others do not specify any A Level subjects).

<b>At this university:</b>	<b>In relation to this subject:</b>	<b>These A Levels are listed</b>	
Birmingham	English Language	English Language	English Lang & Lit
Bristol	English Literature		English Lang & Lit
Durham	English Literature		English Lang & Lit
Edinburgh	“Approved subjects” list	English Language	English Lang & Lit
King’s College London	English Language & Communication	English Language	
Leeds	English Language & Linguistics	English Language	
Liverpool	English	English Language	
Manchester	English Language	English Language	English Lang & Lit
Newcastle	Linguistics	English Language	English Lang & Lit
Nottingham	English Language & Literature	English Language	English Lang & Lit
Oxford	English Language & Literature		English Lang & Lit
Queen Mary, London	English Language & Linguistics	English Language	
Sheffield	English Language & Linguistics	English Language (preferred)	
Southampton	English		English Lang & Lit
University College London	Linguistics	English Language (preferred)	
York	Linguistics	English Language (not required, but singled out as a	

		preparation)	
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(Source: "Entry Requirements" web pages of the relevant BA programmes for 2014 entry).