Correspondent

Mike Heyworth welcomes the new archaeology A level but says students and tutors will need support

In February the minister of state for schools, Nick Gibb MP, made a statement in Parliament about GCSE, AS and A level subject content, for teaching from September 2017. Sadly, there was no announcement of a new GCSE for archaeology. But there was good news about a new AS and A level.

The battle for the GCSE (taken before a level, at age 14–16), was lost several years ago. We face an uphill struggle to achieve its reinstatement, despite the evidence about its importance in a hierarchy of archaeology qualifications which could lead to a university degree. However, the minister’s statement did highlight new archaeology AS and A levels, described in full by the Department for Education in a subject content document (see end note).

The new qualification

In summary, the AS and A level specifications must encourage students to develop their interest in archaeology as they:

- understand past human societies and develop archaeological skills through broad and balanced study
- understand archaeological terms, concepts and skills
- apply skills and methods to primary and secondary archaeological material and data
- demonstrate breadth and depth of archaeological knowledge and understanding, and an awareness of chronology
- understand what archaeological evidence can tell us about past societies, human achievements, beliefs, values and attitudes, and their impact on individuals, groups and societies as reflected in material remains
- demonstrate knowledge, understanding and (where relevant) practical application of:
  - archaeological evidence, and what it can tell us about past human societies
  - techniques used to investigate the archaeological record
  - how archaeological data is analysed and interpreted
  - how past human societies changed or not, and the causes – including at least climate, human innovation, conflict, migration, 

Fig 1: Stratigraphy

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trade and agriculture
• the practice of responsible archaeology, through studying issues and debates in Britain and beyond.

A level students must also study two contrasting archaeological contexts in depth, and two breadth studies.

They are required to:
• interpret and analyse archaeological material and data
• communicate effectively and argue critically using archaeological terminology and conventions
• exemplify their interpretations of data by placing them in their relevant archaeological contexts
• employ knowledge and understanding of the nature of archaeological evidence, and of the strengths and limitations of methods used by archaeologists to gather and interpret that evidence, and be able to evaluate alternative explanations
• organise and communicate their archaeological knowledge and understanding, arguing a clear and logical case and reaching substantiated judgements
• make links and draw comparisons between different aspects of periods, societies or breadth studies covered in their course
• critically evaluate a range of primary and secondary evidence

archaeological material and data, draw substantiated conclusions, and understand how provisional interpretations could be strengthened through future analysis.

A level students need to undertake an individual archaeological investigation that is independently researched and that interacts with the archaeological record, drawing on the knowledge, understanding and skills outlined above.

Supporting the qualification
All this might sound like a tall order for prospective students (and tutors). The current A level in archaeology (provided through the AQA, see end note) has a reputation as one of the more difficult A level qualifications: we called for revisions to the syllabus in a recent CBA report (see end note).

In advance of the new syllabus coming into force in 2017, the archaeological sector now needs to come together to provide resources to support tutors and students. This is very much in line with the recommendations of the recent study. These include calls for a country-wide support network of practical resources and expertise, available to every A level centre from their nearest or most appropriate higher education institution. The study also recommends a national strategy to introduce archaeology to children at primary and secondary level.

Undergraduate applications to study archaeology have been falling, and we need to encourage wider recognition of the value of an archaeology degree – not necessarily as a vocational subject, but as a good all-round general qualification. A level students who have already studied archaeology, and have a greater appreciation of what it offers, are much more likely to consider studying the subject at university. So the more centres that teach archaeology at A level – and in the school curriculum – the greater the pool of students who are aware of the subject’s potential to transform lives. It is no wonder that UK university archaeology departments are being targeted to support the teaching of the new syllabus.

The opportunity to support those teaching A and A level archaeology is, however, thwarted to a considerable degree by the current inability of the awarding body – the AQA (www.aqa.org.uk) – to provide a list of the centres which offer the qualification. This is apparently due to complications caused by the Data Protection Act – though it seems highly doubtful that it was ever designed for this purpose!

The CBA is putting together a list of centres which teach A and A level archaeology. We will make this available on our website at archaeologyuk.org/educate. This is going to take some time to complete, and any missing centres will be added as information comes to light: please update us at education@archaeologyuk.org. In the meantime, we welcome suggestions on how best to support the new A level archaeology syllabus.