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RIGOUR AND RECOGNITION IN HOME, HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY LANGUAGE A LEVELS

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Introduction

Home, Heritage and Community Languages (HHCLs) are languages which are usually used and learned at home, within the community or in faith settings (e.g. Arabic, Polish, Urdu) and not through instruction in mainstream educational settings.

University admissions practices with regard to A Level qualifications are varied and inconsistent (Humphries et al., 2024a; Humphries et al., 2024b; Eppler et al., 2024). In some cases, the qualifications are discounted from offers on the basis that they are assumed to reflect significant prior exposure or 'native' language competence rather than academic achievement and the rigour of the qualifications is called into question.

Such inconsistency risks inequitable access to higher education for linguistically skilled applicants, since it suggests a perceived hierarchy of value within language A Levels and A Level qualifications more generally.

This briefing argues that such assumptions are not supported by the design of A Level qualifications. We undertook a review of government subject content requirements and A Level specifications across awarding bodies and across languages, including those languages commonly taught in schools, such as Spanish, French, German, Irish and Welsh (Second Language) which are here called curricular languages, and those which are typically present in the UK as community languages and are infrequently offered in mainstream schools.

In 2025, A Level qualifications in languages we consider for the purposes of this briefing to be HHCLs were offered in [Arabic](#), [Bengali](#), [Chinese](#), [Gujarati](#), [Italian](#), [Japanese](#), [Modern Greek](#), [Modern Hebrew](#), [Panjabi](#), [Persian](#), [Polish](#), [Portuguese](#), [Russian](#), [Turkish](#) and [Urdu](#) (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2025).

While curricular languages taught in mainstream

schools can function as HHCLs for some candidates in that they may be acquired in the home or community (e.g. a candidate may speak French in the home with a French-speaking parent and be learning French in school), we distinguish between them and other HHCLs at A Level, since qualifications in curricular languages are widely accepted as suitable in university admissions processes. Moreover, we restrict our discussion to those HHCLs for which an A Level qualification is currently available in the UK (e.g. Romanian is widely spoken as a HHCL in the UK, but no A-Level qualification in it currently exists).

As well as comparing the specifications of different types of languages, we also compared the assessment structures of these language specifications with a range of specifications for non-language qualifications at the same level, selected to represent traditional humanities skills and those areas in which some level of exposure in the home or community may exist: [Geography](#), [Music](#), and [Design and Technology](#).

We found that the specifications' assessments are built with a common architecture involving equivalent assessment objectives and weightings, which evaluate a range of academic skills including comprehension, accurate language manipulation, extended analytical writing, independent research and substantial critical and cultural engagement on the part of candidates.

The major difference identified between curricular languages and the majority of languages that we have described as HHCLs here resides in the assessment of speaking. Specifications for languages classified as 'smaller

cohort' in government subject content documents do not assess spoken language production. Instead, only listening, reading and writing skills are examined. This is made clear by examining bodies who use the phrasing Language (listening, reading, writing) for their specifications in these languages.

For these 'listening, reading, writing' languages, speaking is not assessed, but this choice reflects practical concerns of examiner availability rather than a reduction in challenge. In place of spoken assessment, candidates are required to combine skills in comprehension and written production, a task not required of the larger cohort curricular specifications.

We concluded that:

- HHCL A Levels are comparable in rigour to the design of other A Levels and show a level of demand commensurate with other A Level subjects. As such, we propose that stakeholders should treat HHCL A Levels as qualifications of equal status and value to others, consistent with the policy intent from the Department for Education (2023, p. 3) and Ofqual that modern language A Levels with larger and smaller cohorts, i.e. curricular languages and HHCLs, offer comparable rigour and demand.
- Assumptions about candidates' linguistic experience cannot reliably be inferred from the qualifications they present. All language A Levels should therefore, we suggest, be recognised on an equal basis, and no assumption of 'native' or 'home speaker' status should automatically be made on the basis of the language studied.

Throughout this piece we will use the following terms and definitions:

Curricular language: French, Spanish, German, Irish and Welsh (Second Language). These may

be HHCL languages for some, but are not usually treated differently from other A Level subjects in admissions or in society more broadly. We also here include indigenous languages of the UK for which A Levels are offered.

HHCL: We use HHCLs to refer to languages that are not curricular or indigenous, acquired in home or community settings that are often treated differently in admissions from other languages. These usually align with non-curricular languages but not always.

Larger/smaller cohort languages: These terms are used in government subject content guidance and are based on the number of people sitting the qualifications.

In many cases, what we term a HHCL fits under the smaller cohort bracket but not always.

The admissions issue and why it matters

A Level qualifications are used in university admissions as an indication of candidates' preparedness for progression to higher education. Research among school pupils, mainstream school teachers, complementary school teachers and university admissions teams (Humphries et al., 2024a) shows uncertainty and inconsistency about whether an A Level in a HHCL will be fully recognised as part of an offer.

Universities, and sometimes individual colleges and courses within the same university, adopt varied positions on what they often term 'native/home language' A Levels, which creates a 'wide and unsystematic landscape of policies' (Eppler et al., 2024; see also Humphries et al. 2024a; 2024b). This inconsistent admissions practice

does not appear to operate in the same way for qualifications in those languages traditionally taught in mainstream schools, such as French, German, and Spanish, though these languages may also act as ‘home’ or ‘native’ languages for applicants. This raises potential policy issues of inequity in admissions practices and access to higher education: candidates’ assumed exposure to a non-mainstream language may lead to their qualifications being undervalued or even excluded as academic achievements, simply on the basis of the studied language. Such practices suggest a perceived difference in value of the qualifications.

This briefing therefore analyses what the government subject content requirements and the awarding body specifications actually demand of all A Level language candidates – those undertaking qualifications in languages traditionally offered in UK secondary school curricula, languages indigenous to UK regions, and languages more associated with use in the community as HHCLs – with a view to contributing evidence to admissions teams’ decision-making and recognition of the varied landscape of language qualification in the UK.

Policy framework: what A Level language qualifications are designed to do

The Department for Education (England) sets out subject content requirements for all AS and A Level qualifications. For languages, these content requirements distinguish between modern languages with larger entry numbers (Department for Education, 2023a) and those with ‘smaller cohorts’ (Department for Education, 2023b). Language A Level specifications can be developed against either of the subject content requirements. Qualifications developed from

the ‘smaller cohorts’ content are given the title ‘Language (listening, reading, writing)’ to foreground the skills that are assessed.

Crucially, we note that this wording distinguishes between the two sets of languages on the basis of the number of students undertaking the qualifications, **not on any measure or perception of prior exposure to or use of the assessed language.**

Although many of the ‘smaller cohort’ languages are commonly used as HHCLs in the UK, the policy framework is clear that it does not define the qualifications as ‘native speaker’ qualifications, nor does it assume candidates enter with existing advanced proficiency in their chosen language. Some languages typically acquired or used in the community as HHCLs, for example Chinese and Russian, are examined through specifications designed against the larger cohort subject content.

Provision of tuition in languages of all types is mixed, with instruction of languages present in the community such as Italian, Chinese and Russian taking place in some mainstream schools either as curricular options or enrichment activities.

Where HHCL qualifications are supported in mainstream schools it is primarily through payment of examination entry rather than tuition or collaboration with complementary schools (Collen and Duff, 2025, pp. 25, 32; Humphries et al. 2024a).

The subject content requirements documents explicitly state that both types of modern foreign language A Level are designed to represent a comparable level of challenge and are intended to be held in equal esteem, regardless of cohort size:

- **AS and A level specifications for all modern foreign languages must [...] offer comparable levels of rigour and demand.** (*Department for Education 2023b, p. 3*)
- **The government is clear that AS and A levels in these languages are of equal status and value to the AS and A levels in the more widely taught modern languages.** (*Department for Education 2017, p. 11*)

Languages are framed in the content requirements as interdisciplinary humanities subjects that demand and develop high-level practical language skills, cultural understanding, critical thinking and analytical ability. Any admissions practices which assume a lower level of demand in HHCL A Levels therefore run counter to the stated intent of the government subject requirements for the discipline.

What the specifications show: rigour and consistency across awarding bodies and languages offered

Two awarding bodies have developed A Level specifications against the 'smaller cohorts' languages subject content: AQA and Pearson Edexcel. Larger cohort languages specifications have been developed by AQA, Pearson Edexcel, WJEC and CCEA. A Level specifications in England are accredited by the independent regulatory body Ofqual and must comply with its accreditation criterion (Ofqual, 2024). Similar regulatory roles are performed by CCEA Regulation, Qualifications Wales and Qualifications Scotland in the devolved nations. Our own review of these specifications confirms that in the development of specifications, awarding bodies have interpreted content requirements in a way that is rigorous and consistent across awarding bodies and languages offered.

All languages offered across all awarding bodies are assessed according to four assessment objectives (Ofqual, 2017a), each with the same weighting across all languages and specifications:

AO1: Understand and respond, in (speech and) writing, to spoken language drawn from a variety of sources (20%)

AO2: understand and respond, in (speech and) writing, to written language drawn from a variety of sources (30%)

AO3: manipulate the language accurately and appropriately, in (spoken and) written forms, using a range of lexis and structure (30%)

AO4: show knowledge and understanding of and respond critically and analytically to different aspects of the culture and society of countries or communities where the language is spoken and demonstrate critical analysis and evaluation of works created in the language studied (20%).

Each language is assessed through a series of three papers (three per year in the case of CCEA, where papers are distributed across two years (e.g. CCEA, 2018d, pp.6-8), targeting the skills of listening, reading, writing, speaking (for larger cohorts), translation and essay writing. Each language also contains an individual research project component, providing candidates with the opportunity to develop their skills in independent research (e.g. Pearson Edexcel (2022d) for Russian, a larger cohort specification, AQA (2017f) for Polish, a smaller cohort specification).

These objectives require engagement with the language and culture that extends beyond everyday communicative competence and align language requirements with other humanities subjects at the same level.

They prioritise analytical thinking, engagement with complex material and structured argumentation.

HHCLs languages and speaking assessment

The subject requirements differ between larger and smaller cohort languages with respect to the assessment of speaking. For smaller cohort languages, candidates are not assessed in their capacity to produce the spoken language. This may be interpreted as a reduction in the level of demand in the qualification or a tacit understanding that candidates' speaking ability is already well developed.

In fact, the rationale for an exclusion of the assessment of spoken language is largely practical: the government response to the consultation on the smaller cohort subject content cites difficulties in 'recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of examiners' with appropriate expertise (Department for Education, 2017, p.5). Where speaking is not assessed, specifications require candidates to **combine** skills in comprehension of spoken and written language use on common subject matter and to respond in writing in the target language. Consultation responses for the adopted smaller cohort subject content suggest a perception of the smaller cohort requirements as potentially more challenging than the larger cohort content (Department for Education, 2017, p.11; Humphries et al., 2024a).

From a policy perspective, this difference represents a change in the configuration of assessment rather than a reduction in standards. The underlying assessment objectives and weightings remain unchanged across the two cohort sizes and reflect a consistent level of academic demand.

Cultural and intellectual demand

Language A Levels require deep critical interaction with cultures and societies in which the assessed language is in use.

Each language A Level covers a wide thematic range, including social, historical, cultural and political issues pertaining to the countries and communities where the language is spoken. Within these themes there are specific links to significant historical events in the language-speaking countries and communities (e.g., The Creation of Pakistan in 1947 (Pearson Edexcel, 2018f, p. 9)) and community-specific cultural events (e.g. Traditional festivals in the Chinese community (Pearson Edexcel 2026, p.9)). Candidates are required to focus on one of these aspects for their independent research project, and provide both a presentation and discussion of their chosen topic as part of their assessment.

Within the extended writing component of assessment for all languages, candidates must reflect on and engage critically with two artistic pieces from a country or community where the language of study is spoken (either two literary works or one literary work and one film).

To understand such skill development as inherent in language knowledge through prior exposure undervalues the intellectual work required by the design of assessments at this level – notably the critical and cultural awareness assessed in extended writing and cultural analysis.

Comparability with other subjects

To evaluate the demand of these qualifications in a broader A Level context, our review compared them with specifications for three non-language subjects: Geography (Pearson Edexcel, 2024a), Music (Pearson Edexcel, 2021) and Design and Technology (AQA, 2022). These three subjects present a similar structure of assessment – Geography and Music involve three papers, whilst Design and Technology involves two. Both Geography and Design and Technology also involve a non-examination assessment (NEA), which draws a parallel to the independent research project present in language A Levels. These three specifications present assessment of similar skills to languages, through understanding and recall, application of knowledge for analysis, interpretation and evaluation, as well as critical thinking. Interaction with current social issues is also present in these specifications, in the form of social and environmental issues such as geopolitics for Geography, sustainability for Design and Technology, and the heritage and cultural context of different music genres for Music.

Prior exposure: what specifications assume (and what they do not)

The inconsistent treatment of HHCL A Levels in admissions processes is sometimes justified through an assumption that these qualifications reflect ‘native’ competence rather than academic achievement, a concept which is particularly problematic for populations whose experience and exposure to HHCLs is itself inconsistent and varied (see Eppler et al., 2024, for a useful summary of these issues).

The specifications we reviewed make no explicit mention of ‘native speaker’ status for candidates, and though each language specification indicates that candidates entering the course will benefit from having the skills associated with a GCSE standard of the language, there are no prior learning requirements for entry to any of the language A Levels across awarding bodies and specifications. Indeed, there is no requirement for significant prior exposure to the assessed language.

In this way, candidates with lower levels of exposure to the language prior to the course are not at a disadvantage, and conversely those with higher levels of exposure are not awarded disproportionately. Ofqual (2017b) research into the effect of candidates identified by their teachers as ‘native speakers’ in curricular language A Levels, showed only minor differences in achievement, similar to or smaller than the tolerances applied to outcomes by exam boards. This study also noted low levels of ‘native speakers’ within A Level language cohorts and difficulties in discerning what exactly defines a ‘native speaker’, and warned that their findings should be treated with caution. The issues problematised in this study reflect that the effect of ‘native speakers’ within A Level language cohorts is much smaller than what is anticipated by stakeholders.

Discounting a HHCL A Level on the basis of presumed prior extensive exposure to the studied language makes inferences that the qualification’s assessment framework does not rely on. We suggest that admissions processes which discount A Levels in languages assumed to have been acquired in the home or community reflect assumptions about candidates that cannot consistently or reliably be inferred from their qualifications.

Public discourse: an ‘easy’ qualification

Media narratives suggest that lower-level language qualifications (GCSEs) can be perceived as ‘easy’ and serve as a ‘loophole’ for schools to claim credit for existing language proficiency (Harding, 2025). This position contributes to a societal perception that HHCL study is not real achievement.

Our review of A Level specifications challenges this assumption. A Level assessment is built on standardised objectives and weightings, extended analytical writing, cultural awareness, and independent research skills, in addition to high-level fluency across multiple language skills. What is assessed is therefore not only language proficiency but the capacity to use the assessed language appropriately for the purposes of the assessment. The qualifications are designed to accept and account for a range of language exposures among candidates.

Inconsistent policy in university admissions may inadvertently establish and reinforce a hierarchy of languages and a hierarchy of learners, where use of a language in the home or community is attributed with value where it relates to languages traditionally taught to second-language learners in the school system, but undervalued where it relates to non-curricular languages.

Policy implications

1. Consistent recognition of qualification status: universities, schools and other stakeholders should be informed of the intention that all A Level languages are designed to be held in equal value and present comparable levels of rigour and challenge.
2. Policies which assume an advantage of prior exposure for non-curricular or smaller cohort qualifications should be avoided: no such exposure or proficiency is assumed in the design of the assessments.
3. A practical resource to promote best practice among stakeholders, including these findings from our review of specifications, should be developed. A Toolkit addressing issues around HHCL qualification recognition is currently in its pilot phase (funded by AHRC and QUB).

Next steps

Our research is continuing to explore the admissions policies of UK universities with regard to this issue. A comprehensive review of current university admissions policies is under way, adding to the bank of evidence of existing varied practice across a range of institutions identified in existing work in the area (Humphries et al., 2024a; 2024b; Eppler et al., 2024). In developing admissions policies, stakeholders should be encouraged to consider Department for Education intentions and awarding body implementations of subject content. To that end, the results of our specification comparison have been included in the Toolkit for best practice for university admissions offices which is being developed as an outcome of Humphries et al.’s (2024) work.

Conclusion

Our review of evidence from government subject content requirements and A Level specifications shows that language qualifications at this level, across the board, and including those most often functioning as HHCLs are designed to a consistent and rigorous set of academically demanding criteria. These specifications do not assume significant prior exposure to the assessed language and evaluate skills which extend well beyond communicative proficiency. Admissions processes that discount those languages assumed to be used as HHCLs by candidates are applied inconsistently across languages and rely on assumptions which do not emerge from the qualifications’ content or specifications. We suggest that this inconsistency should be addressed to enable equitable access to higher education.

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