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HOME, HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY LANGUAGE A LEVELS IN UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS: REQUIREMENTS, RIGOUR, RECOGNITION

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Introduction

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

University admissions practices with regard to A Level qualifications in HHCLs 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 ‘native’ language competence or prior exposure to the language, rather than a rigorous academic achievement. Such inconsistency risks inequitable access to higher education and suggests a perceived hierarchy of value within language A Levels.

This briefing argues that such assumptions are not supported by the design and content of A Level qualifications. We undertake a review of government subject content requirements and A Level specifications across awarding bodies and across languages, including both curricular languages (i.e. those commonly taught in schools) and HHCLs. In this briefing, we use the term HHCL in a restricted way to reflect the differing treatment of languages in university admissions processes. While curricular languages function as HHCLs for some candidates (e.g. a candidate may speak French in the home with a French-speaking parent and be learning French in school), we exclude these from our discussion of HHCLs, since qualifications in curricular languages are widely accepted as suitable in university admissions processes.

As well as comparing the specifications of different types of languages, we compare the assessment structures of language specifications with a range of specifications for non-language qualifications at the same level: [Geography](#),

[Music](#), and [Design and Technology](#).

Our findings show that the specifications’ assessments across all languages 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 HHCLs resides in the assessment of speaking. Many HHCLs are classified in government subject content documents as ‘smaller cohort’ languages (see below) where the specifications do not assess spoken language production. Instead, only listening, reading and writing skills are examined. This choice reflects practical concerns relating to 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’ specifications.

We conclude that:

- HHCL A Levels are comparable in rigour to the design and content of other A Levels (Department for Education 2023a, p.3). As such, we propose that stakeholders treat HHCL A Levels as qualifications of equal status and value to all other A Levels.
- Assumptions about candidates’ linguistic experience cannot be reliably inferred from the qualifications they present and should

not come into decisions about eligibility of A Levels in admissions practices.

Definitions

Throughout this piece, we will categorise the languages under discussion in the following way:

Curricular languages (taught as additional languages in schools): French, German, Spanish, [Irish](#) and [Welsh \(Second Language\)](#). A Levels in French, German and Spanish are offered by [AQA](#), [CCEA](#), [Pearson Edexcel](#), and [WJEC](#).

HHCL(s): A Level qualifications in HHCLs were offered in 2026 in [Arabic](#), [Bengali](#), [Chinese](#), [Gujarati](#), [Italian](#), [Japanese](#), [Modern Greek](#), [Modern Hebrew](#), [Panjabi](#), [Persian](#), [Polish](#), [Portuguese](#), [Russian](#), [Turkish](#) and [Urdu](#).

Larger/smaller cohort languages: These terms are used in government subject content guidance and are based on the number of people sitting the qualifications (Department for Education 2023a). Most HHCLs (as per our definition above) are smaller cohort, with the exception of Chinese, Italian and Russian which are larger cohort.

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 and as a method of selection within the body of applicants for courses. Research among school pupils, mainstream school teachers and complementary school teachers shows uncertainty about whether an A Level in a HHCL will be fully recognised as part of an admissions offer (Humphries et al. 2024a). Universities, and sometimes individual colleges and courses within

the same university, adopt varied positions on what they often term 'native/home language' A Levels (Humphries et al. 2024a, 2024b).

This inconsistent admissions practice does not appear to operate in the same way for A Level qualifications in curricular languages, even though these may also act as 'native/home languages' for applicants. This raises potential policy issues of inequity in admissions practices and access to higher education: candidates' assumed exposure to a HHCL may lead to their qualifications being undervalued or even excluded as academic achievements.

This briefing explores whether A Levels in HHCLs are, in academic terms, as rigorous and demanding as those in curricular languages. We analyse the details of the government subject content requirements and the awarding body specifications in all A Level language qualifications, comparing the specifications in curricular languages and HHCLs. The briefing aims to offer admissions teams clear guidance on the rigour and consistency of these qualifications, thereby enabling evidence-based decision-making regarding offers for entry to undergraduate courses.

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. Language A Level specifications may be developed against the subject requirements for either larger cohorts (Department for Education 2023b) or smaller cohorts (Department for Education 2023a), with the latter specifications given the title 'Language (listening, reading, writing)' to foreground the skills that are assessed.

Crucially, 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 most of the smaller cohort languages are HHCLs, the policy framework does not define the qualifications as ‘native speaker’ qualifications, nor does it assume candidates enter with existing advanced proficiency in their chosen language. Three HHCLs (Chinese, Italian and Russian) are examined through specifications designed against the larger cohort subject content.

The subject content requirements explicitly state that both larger and smaller cohort language A Levels represent a comparable level of challenge and are intended to be held in equal esteem:

- ***AS and A level specifications for all modern foreign languages must [...] offer comparable levels of rigour and demand.***
(Department for Education 2023a, 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)

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

Developed by awarding bodies in the first instance, all A Level specifications must then be accredited by an independent regulatory body,

e.g. Ofqual in England and CCEA in NI, to ensure consistency across subjects and compliance with accreditation criteria.

Language A Levels, from all awarding bodies, are assessed against four assessment objectives (Ofqual 2017a), each with the same weighting:

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 and include an AS qualification (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 (CCEA specifications are an exception here), 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 prioritise analytical thinking, engagement with complex material and structured argumentation. Crucially, they extend far beyond everyday communicative competence.

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 these 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 to 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 works from a country or community where the language of study is spoken (either two literary works or one literary work and one film).

In short, A Level assessment in all languages goes well beyond linguistic skills, requiring critical engagement with the assessed language and related cultures. An assumption that some level of prior knowledge of the language makes a

HHCL A Level less demanding undervalues the intellectual work required by the design of assessments at this level.

HHCLs 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.

The rationale for this exclusion is 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.10).

Where speaking is not assessed, specifications require candidates to **combine skills** in comprehension of spoken and written language on common subject matter and to respond in writing in the target language.

The removal of the speaking assessment is interpreted by some as a reduction in the level of demand in the qualification or a tacit understanding that candidates’ speaking ability is already well developed.

However, this view is not supported by the Department for Education (2017, p.11) who confirm that the combining of skills required in smaller cohort specifications represents an equal challenge for students.

From a policy perspective, this difference in configuration of the assessment is just that: the assessment objectives and weightings reflect a consistent level of academic demand.

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 with most exam boards.

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 embedded, in the form of social and environmental topics 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 attributed to a belief that those sitting these qualifications are ‘native’ speakers and that this prior exposure diminishes their academic achievement. This belief wrongly assumes that all applicants have the same linguistic background; in reality, applicants’ experience of and exposure to HHCLs varies significantly (see Eppler et al. 2024, for a useful summary of these issues). The specifications we have reviewed make no explicit mention of ‘native speaker’ status or ‘prior exposure to the language’ 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.

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 rewarded disproportionately. Ofqual’s research (2017b) 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’, warning that their findings should be treated with caution. The issues problematised in Ofqual’s study show that the effect of ‘native speakers’ within A Level language cohorts is much smaller than stakeholders anticipate.

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 would not recognise. We suggest that admissions processes which discount A Levels in HHCLs reflect assumptions about candidates that cannot consistently or reliably be inferred from their qualifications. What is more, the same assumptions and exclusions do not apply for either curricular languages or other subjects. For example, as Eppler

et al. (2024) point out, candidates presenting with an A Level in Music may well have had significant prior exposure to the study and performance of music. This introduces an inequality into admissions processes.

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 are designed for candidates from a range of linguistic backgrounds.

A Level assessment across curricular languages and HHCLs 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 a demanding range of purposes. There is no evidence that these are ‘easy’ qualifications that can boost grades, as has been suggested in some public discourse in relation to HHCL GCSEs (Harding 2025). Admissions processes that discount HHCLs may be relying on assumptions which do not emerge from the qualifications’ content or specifications. We suggest that inconsistencies in how different languages are viewed across a range of UK universities should be addressed to enable equitable access to higher education.

Policy implications

1. Consistent recognition of qualification status: all A Level languages are designed to have comparable levels of rigour and challenge; they are evaluated using similar methods and standards. This must be acknowledged by all stakeholders, including in university admissions policies.
2. Policies which assume prior exposure or ‘native speaker’ status in the case of candidates taking HHCL qualifications must be avoided: no such exposure or proficiency is assumed in the design of the assessments.
3. A number of current university admissions policies suggest a lack of knowledge of the similarities between smaller and larger cohort language specifications. This must be addressed.

Next Steps

The research for this paper is part of a wider body of ongoing research in Queen’s University Belfast on HHCLs which is led by Dr Emma Humphries and Professor Janice Carruthers, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P014313/1 and AH/X003426/1). Based on this underpinning research and in dialogue with key stakeholders, we have designed and launched a Toolkit for universities. The Toolkit allows admissions teams to compare their current practices against research-informed best practice and provides practical steps for aligning to this. The team are in the process of rolling this out across UK universities and encourage anyone who would like to be involved or know more to contact us (either via toolkit@qub.ac.uk or one of our email addresses listed below).

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