

Briefing note re Asset Languages

27 July 2012

Background

[Asset Languages](#) is a way of providing accreditation for language learning which was developed by Cambridge Assessment on behalf of the then DCSF as part of the National Languages Strategy. One of the objectives of the National Languages Strategy, which ran from 2002 to 2010, was to develop a national recognition scheme for language learning which would describe a learner's progress at any phase of education and complement existing qualifications. This national recognition scheme was launched in May 2005 and known as the 'Languages Ladder'. In parallel to this, Cambridge Assessment was awarded the contract to develop two ways of evaluating progress against the Languages Ladder: via teacher assessment and via external tests. The first external assessments were launched in September 2005.

Tests were developed at 4 levels ranging from Breakthrough (entry level) to Advanced (A level). The Languages Ladder included two further levels – Proficiency and Mastery - but Asset qualifications were never developed at these levels.

Both the teacher assessments and the external tests were designed to be highly flexible, allowing individual students to obtain certification of their progress in each of the four skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) separately and at different levels if appropriate. They are not age related but designed to allow learners to progress to the next 'rung' on the ladder at any stage, similar to music grades. They rely on 'can do' statements so can be easily understood by employers, and dovetail with both national and international qualifications frameworks. Asset was designed to allow for discrete skills assessment in order to offer flexibility in matching the 'jagged profile' of language skills that employers often say they need (for example, a higher level in speaking and reading than in writing), and to offer maximum flexibility for integration within vocational or Diploma type courses.

The thinking behind Asset Languages and the Languages Ladder was to motivate learners, particularly at the early stages of language learning, through the achievement of short-term goals.

By the end of the National Languages Strategy in 2010, Asset Languages qualifications were in place in 25 languages, although not at all levels in all languages. They were/are used by primary and secondary schools (including independent schools), adult education, and the complementary sector, to accredit language learning variously at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4, in the sixth form and outside of formal education.

The levels of Asset Languages qualifications were developed to match the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) and the descriptors were used in developing the new National Curriculum. They therefore counted towards performance tables and attracted UCAS points for university entry. However, they have not been recognised as counting towards the English Baccalaureate and only 'Level 3 Asset Languages Ladder' qualifications will count in the [Key Stage 4 performance tables](#).¹

¹ As the new GCSE languages exams were developed from the National Curriculum levels which in turn were based on the Asset descriptors, it is quite illogical now to equate Level 3 Asset exam with GCSE, which is equivalent to Level 2.

They are regarded by teachers who have used them as at least as rigorous as GCSEs – some say they are a better test of the level that pupils have actually reached. The table below shows the proportion of independent and maintained schools using Asset Languages qualifications at each Key Stage (source, Language Trends 2011- data tables²)

Year	KS3- state sector	KS3 – independent sector	KS4 - state	KS4 - independent	Sixth Form - state	Sixth Form - independent
2011	8%	6%	5%	4%	3%	5%
2010	11%	6%	7%	4%	4%	2%
2009	16%	6%	10%	4%	4%	1%
2008	18%	6%	10%	4%	n/a	n/a
2007	11%	6%	5%	3%	n/a	n/a
2006	n/a	n/a	9%	n/a	n/a	n/a

On 4 July 2012 OCR, Cambridge Assessment’s exam board responsible for Asset Languages qualifications, announced its intention to introduce redeveloped qualifications in French, German, Italian, Mandarin and Spanish in 2014, but that it would not be redeveloping assessments for other languages.

Implications of the withdrawal of Asset Languages qualifications in different languages

The decision will leave some languages un-provided for. Asset Languages currently offers accreditation for Cantonese, Cornish, Hindi, Somali, Swedish, Tamil and Yoruba, for which no GCSE examination exists. An IGCSE examination is available in Hindi for speakers of Hindi as a second language.

The decision will leave some learners un-provided for, even where GCSE exams exist in the languages concerned. In the case of Arabic for example, the GCSE is designed for learners who speak Arabic at home, not for those who have learnt it as a foreign language.

The decision will remove the possibility of receiving accreditation for language learning at a level lower than GCSE. This is particularly pertinent in the case of lesser-taught languages like Japanese, where the ‘progression through small steps’ approach has been highly effective and where teachers who are themselves only beginning to teach the language do not yet have the confidence to teach to GCSE. Such languages are often taught as extra-curricular or enrichment courses, sometimes in the Sixth Form where success can motivate learners to further higher level study at university. In the case of primary schools,

² Quotes are reproduced below in the Annex

GCSEs are inappropriate not only because the level is too high, but because the content is aimed at more mature learners. Asset Languages qualifications on the other hand have been used very successfully in primary schools.

The removal of Asset Languages qualifications in a diverse range of languages will therefore set back attempts to introduce languages which business leaders say are needed to develop British exports to BRIC and other high-growth countries such as Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and South Asian languages.

The decision also represents a blow to ethnic minority communities who wish to see their children achieve qualifications in their heritage languages, and could be regarded as discriminatory. One of the great achievements of Asset Languages has been to make no distinction between the status of languages or the status of learners: an intermediate level in Bengali is exactly equivalent to an intermediate level in French or German, since all are based on the same 'can do' statements, and the child who learns Russian as a foreign language can take the same exam as a child who speaks it at home.

The availability of formal examinations is important in encouraging families whose children speak languages other than English at home to develop literacy and higher level skills in those languages. This is seen to be the key to accessing the cognitive advantages of bilingualism as well as developing a more formal knowledge of the language that can be used in business and employment contexts.

The flexibility of the Asset languages qualifications to accredit the four skills separately is also a strength which other exams do not have. In languages with different scripts, learners may have a higher level in speaking and listening than in reading and writing, or can gather first a qualification in speaking which motivates them to take reading and writing at a later stage. This flexibility is of particular importance in encouraging learners in the more difficult languages which are needed for global trade, security and diplomacy. As an English-speaking nation, we need to encourage the teaching and learning of as wide a range of languages as possible, and bear in mind also the benefits of a relatively easy transfer between languages belonging to the same 'family': thus a Polish speaker will find it easier to learn Russian, a Turkish speaker Kazakh etc. This may be of crucial importance in future.

Quote from GCHQ in relation to the importance of the availability of qualifications in a wide range of languages:

"By far the biggest knowledge/qualification gap is the total lack of undergraduate university courses in this country in the languages of highest priority to GCHQ (such as Afghan or Pakistani languages). It is also frequently the case that no GCSE or A level qualifications are available in them either. This naturally makes it more difficult for prospective candidates who are not native speakers in the language for which they are applying to prove their level of ability. Our recruitment tests go some way to making up for this, but the lack of university teaching in these languages remains a major problem, which, if left unchecked, could store up recruitment shortfalls in the future."

Head of Language Engagement and Externals, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ)

Annex

Quotes from respondents to Language Trends 2011

From maintained schools:

Internal teacher Asset assessment is used widely.

We use the asset languages Russian breakthrough tests at the end of year 9 to encourage students to take the language further. The tests do not exactly match the content of lessons but provide enough opportunity for students to value what they have learnt. As a result we have considered offering the same tests in French and German.

All do Asset in year 9. Recently dropped Asset in year 10 to make time for Controlled Assessments but not worried about this. Native speakers take IGCSE.

ASSET Intermediate was a good alternative to GCSE for early entry as it does not pin you down to controlled assessments and you can be flexible about when you enter each class for each skill. Unfortunately it has not been recognised for the purposes of the Ebacc measure! We have, therefore, moved to iGCSE for our bilingual pupils in year 9. We still continue to use ASSET at Breakthrough and Preliminary level in French and Spanish.

Last year 5 pupils took Somali Intermediate Asset for the first time. It is good although a little complicated to administer. This year more pupils will be attempting different languages & my Head of Community languages has just been on a course & is co-ordinating this.

We are an accredited centre for Asset languages and we used to enter students at the end of KS3 when languages were still optional. Now we only enter the odd pupil who has not been able we are an accredited centre for asset lang. and we used to enter students at the end of KS3 when languages were still optional. Now we only enter the odd pupil who has not been able for whatever reason to sit or pass their GCSE

Asset was in Russian Preliminary speaking last year (20 students), now Italian for this year (4 students).

Have used Asset as post-GCSE fast track course for Y11.

The use of ASSET Languages for Year 9 works very well, keeps students motivated after they have chosen their options for GCSE and have decided to drop French or Chinese and continue with Spanish or German (which are the languages they started in Y7 and have done for 3 years).

Not sure if it's worthwhile - only done once – Asset

We felt that Asset Languages was too administration heavy and not suitable for the lower ability sets.

Asset languages not been very successful and the results seem a bit random. Not very happy with it and are looking for an alternative for those not continuing with a FL at KS4

ASSET Languages has given us the opportunity to offer beginners courses in languages students may not have studied further down the college. The flexibility of the qualification means that we can adapt it to different amounts of contact time

We only use Asset with a very small number of extra-curricular Arabic

We use Asset languages with one very weak KS3 class in Y7 & 8 to ensure continued motivation and a sense of progress. In Y9 & 10 similarly - to provide an alternative to GCSE. In Y11 we offered Italian as a new language for a weak group of students which has proved to be very motivating and successful.

I am a bit disappointed with Asset Languages exams. The feedback after exams is poor and the fact that all papers are live and therefore no past papers being available is a definite drawback. We might consider not using Asset Exams in the future as the vast majority of students will do GCSE languages again and therefore will not need a KS3 accreditation

Asset - no longer in EBAC only used with a small number of students who are following an alternative route for most of their GCSE's

We have started doing ASSET Languages with Y9 French and Mandarin for those students who opt not to continue with French but with their other language to GCSE. ASSET Languages keeps them motivated in Y9 and gets them a qualification for their level.

We offered Asset languages in Yr 9 to a French group but this was not rolled out across all three languages. It was a lot of testing!

We used to do Asset Languages in Year 9 but found this too cumbersome and expensive.

We have introduced Asset languages with accreditation for one group of very weak linguists in Y7 & 8 each year.

We tried Asset Languages for a while but didn't really have any impact so it was discontinued.

Asset languages introduced.

Looking into offering ASSET Languages.

Pupils now start GCSE study in Y9 & we have larger numbers opting for languages in Y9. However, in French & Spanish there are 2 sets and in the lower set some pupils will be more suited to entry level or Asset languages breakthrough.

Our top 5 sets all study the GCSE at foundation level at the end of year 9 to increase attainment and to maximise our Ebacc figures as MFL is optional at year 10. The remaining classes currently study NVQ Level 1 or the Asset Languages Breakthrough qualification.

We are considering Asset Languages to provide motivation at KS3 and encourage KS4 take-up.

Pupils that are going to be ending their MFL studies at the end of KS3 take ASSET exams at the end of yr 9 so they have accreditation of their language studies

We offer Asset Languages Accreditation at the end of KS3

Recognition of ASSET for Ebac

..the top sets of each will do GCSE and the other sets will do ASSET - these groups have 2 hours per week this year and will have 3.5 hours next year.

Enrichment languages offered in Y11- pupils take Asset languages exams

Introduced Advanced Asset assessments for students who complete GCSE in year 10

Use of Asset languages by one of our staff for the G2G year 8 pupils

From independent schools:

Asset languages has proved motivating due to the fact that pupils can re-take elements -and are examined in their normal classrooms, by their class teacher, during the academic year, rather than at the end.

I love Asset Languages for KS3 but it has been used against me in that this year parents and pupils see that there are points awarded for languages for 6th Form from Asset Langs levels 4-6.

Asset in addition to GCSE

Asset : it is my perception that it is very expensive and needs a lot of staff training.

They are useful for students who don't "fit" the usual curriculum offering, eg bilingual or lacking in one skill: Italian uses Asset as there is very limited teaching time; Asset used in yr 9 for all students so that they have some qualification when they leave.

Great for specific classes. We use ASSET for Mandarin and IGCSE for French in year 10. We also considered ASSET as a matter of course in yr9, but this has yet to come to anything.

Too early to comment, as this is the first group to do Asset

Asset Languages gives us a yardstick for measuring pupil performance, and as an externally-marked test gives objective data. A certificated outcome for those who abandon language study at end Y9.

Three pupils are learning Spanish, at Asset Level 1-3, refuseniks from French.