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## **Pupils to sit entry tests for university law courses**

BY GLEN OWEN, EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

STUDENTS applying to read law at the leading universities will have to sit a joint entrance paper as part of this autumn's selection process.

The plans, disclosed by *The Times* last year, were accelerated after tutors complained that the proliferation of top grades at A level had effectively turned the current admissions round into a random exercise.

The move to sideline A levels comes as a government adviser is completing a review of school examinations.

The National Admissions Test for Law is being set by the universities of Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, East Anglia, Nottingham, Oxford and University College London (UCL).

The two-hour paper, containing multiple-choice questions and a short essay, is intended to detect "intellectual potential" — a tacit acknowledgement that A levels no longer fulfil that role. Candidates will sit the test in November, for entry in 2005.

The plans follow the decision of Oxford, Cambridge and UCL to introduce a paper for medical students. The first Biomedical Admissions Test was taken last autumn.

After medicine, law is the most keenly contested subject at university, with 81,000 applications for 13,000 places.

During the discussions that followed last summer's record A-level results, some tutors argued that they did not have the time or money to administer a national test. But predictions of a further surge in candidates this year, because of school-leavers deferring plans for a gap year and rushing into university before top-up fees are introduced, have led them to conclude that they have little choice.



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The test is intended to filter out the “good” A-level students from the rest of the pack by testing raw reasoning powers rather than knowledge.

Its architects hope that it will also end the criticisms of universities for engaging in “social engineering”, after they started making lower A-level offers to pupils from deprived areas. The test is designed to provide “objective evaluations of candidates from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds by assessing general intellectual skills of comprehension, analysis, logic and judgment . . . in this way the test will help to widen participation in higher education”.

Candidates will spend one hour and 20 minutes on multiple-choice questions, which will require them to make logical deductions from passages of text. In the remaining 40 minutes they will be invited to write an essay “supporting or defending a stated position”. Although it will be made available to other law schools, the test will be compulsory only for entrants to the eight universities that devised it. Sample question papers will be made available over the next few months.

Tim Kaye, dean of undergraduate admissions at Birmingham, said universities had acted to ensure that they were selecting the best students. “The growing number of candidates with top scores at GCSE and A level has made it increasingly difficult for the most competitive law schools in the country to rank their applicants satisfactorily,” he said.

“The national admissions test will allow them to pool their expertise, reduce the overall number of tests taken by aspiring law students and give more even-handed and transparent consideration to all their candidates. In GCSEs and A levels we already have measures of existing educational achievement, which is important. But we would like to do more to identify relevant intellectual potential, which is also important.”

Mike Tomlinson, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, is leading a review of GCSEs and A levels, with the intention of replacing them with a baccalaureate-style diploma. He will present his report to Charles Clarke, the Education Secretary, this month. This year independent schools stated their opposition to the plans, arguing that it would be simpler to make the current examinations more difficult.

Yesterday the CBI said that abolition of the current system would confuse employers and distract from the real problem of underachievement.