

## Associate in Arts: a history

### When was it introduced?

The Delegacy for Local Examinations was set up by a Statute of Congregation 'de examinatione candidatorum qui non sunt de corpore Universitatis' in 1857, following the recommendation of the Committee on Middle Class Examinations. The first examinations were held in 1858 and the title Associate in Arts was given out to those passing the senior examination right from the start.

### Why was it introduced?

The Junior and Senior Local Examinations were introduced for the guidance and improvement of Middle Class or non-academical education as a whole, 'that the University might confer a great benefit on that large class of persons who cannot afford, or who do not require a University education for their children, by undertaking to examine boys, about the time of their leaving school'.

The University did not prescribe a curriculum or method of teaching; it sought merely to test the results of teaching. There was seen to be 'a want of any trustworthy test to distinguish good and bad schools'. Schoolmasters had no guide to direct them as to what subjects they should teach, or how they should teach them. This led to a great deal of 'skilful puffing' – bluff – which confused parents, who had no reliable guide as to which school to prefer. The Senior Local Exam was seen as the answer to this and it was thought that 'it would probably bring within its operation many even of the higher class who now enter professions where an academical degree is not wanted, but whose parents would be glad to have the schoolwork of their boys authoritatively tested, if it could be done without the expense of a University education'.

The title of Associate in Arts, therefore, was 'to prove that a candidate was well fitted for the situations in life which young men usually enter about that age (18), or for continuing their studies with advantage.' It was obviously also the idea that the University might in this way spread its catchment area wider: 'many young men in straitened circumstances who would do credit to the University and good to themselves if they came, are now prevented from doing so because they have no means of judging whether their talents and attainments would justify them in putting their friends to such an expense.' The senior exam was to be thought of as the 'natural close of School education, just as the BA is the natural close of College education'. The title of 'Associate in Arts' (AA) was to be seen as the 'lowest step in a well known scale of dignity' and it was thought that it was 'likely to incite those who gain distinction in the AA to come to this University to try to mount the higher step of BA.'

What education the Middle Class was receiving was not thought liberal enough. The AA was to promote the arts and a well cultured education over 'bastard practical instruction': 'while the training of men who read for honours is thoroughly appreciated, grave doubts are entertained as to the effects of the present line of study on the more commonplace minds, and many a father thinks that an apprenticeship served under one of his own class is a far better training for acquiring knowledge than the best social arrangements gentlemen are capable of making...Therefore, the

University proposes to accept, to honour and to associate any young men who come up to a certain standard of mental culture....If, by the means of a healthy literature, the University can liberalise commercial education, there will be a response to many an appeal of reason or of charity, which now falls dead on minds filled only with images of the market or of sensual enjoyment.'

In summary, the examination for the title of 'Associate in Arts' was introduced in order to give direction to the country's secondary education system and to protect the liberal arts. It was also a political move on the part of the University to gain the allegiance of a large class of people who were of rising importance in society. As TD Acland, Fellow of All Souls, said, 'Practically the Associates will be limited to the upper middle class, to gentlemen engaged in mercantile business, in engineering, in what are sometimes called the practical branches of the legal and medical professions.' The exam would also encourage those who would not normally consider it, to apply to the University.

### Requirements

The Junior Examination was for those under the age of fifteen, the Senior Examination for those under eighteen, until 1888, when the age limit was dropped. Only the Senior Examination led to the title of AA.

There was a Preliminary Examination for both Senior and Junior candidates, which tested elements of English Grammar and Orthography, Arithmetic, Geography, and an outline of English History. After passing his Prelims, a Junior candidate would have to sit at least one and not more than four of the eight subjects on offer. Four were literary, four scientific. The list was: Latin, Greek, French, German, Mathematics, Mechanics, Chemistry, and Botany and Zoology. Later Drawing and Music were added.

A Senior candidate, after passing Prelims, had to pass at least two of the following sections:

- A. English (History, Literature, Geography, Outlines of Political Economy and English Law)
- B. Language (Latin, Greek, French and German)
- C. Mathematics (Pure Mathematics and Mechanics)
- D. Physics (Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Vegetable and Animal Physiology, Geology, and Mineralogy)
- E. Drawing and Architecture
- F. Music

A pass in one subject meant a pass in the section.

For the Junior Examination there were no division lists for the different subjects, but the students were ranked overall. The Seniors, however, had a division list for each subject. At Junior and Senior levels there were also exams in the Rudiments of Faith and Religion. This was compulsory 'unless objection was made by one's parent or guardian'. There were no division lists for the Religious Knowledge papers.

### When were the examinations and title of 'AA' in operation?

The Junior Examination ran in some form from 1858 to 1945, when it was abandoned. The title of 'AA' was abandoned in 1914, although the Senior Local Examination itself continued until 1923. The decision to discontinue the title was taken at a meeting on the 20th of February 1913: "It was agreed to recommend the Delegates to request the Hebdomadal Council to introduce a Statute modifying Statt Tit VIII sect I a) by discontinuing the title of 'AA'; b) by discontinuing the obligation to offer Religious Knowledge; c) by empowering the Delegates to issue Certificates on the results of School Examinations."

The Minutes of the Hebdomadal Council for Monday 10<sup>th</sup> March contain the letter from the Delegates. The title is dismissed in a short paragraph at the end of the letter: "3. In the opinion of the Delegates, the retention of the title of 'Associate of Arts' is undesirable, the abbreviation 'AA' conferring no practical benefit on its holder, having been occasionally used or interpreted as equivalent to a degree."

In the Regulations for 1914, the title of 'AA' disappears and is replaced by the 'Senior Certificate'.

In July 1918, the Higher School Certificate Examination (HSCE) was introduced. The introduction to the Regulations for the previous year describes the reasons for the new exam: "The HSCE is intended to test the work of pupils of about eighteen, who have pursued for about two years a course of study in accordance with an organised curriculum, and have also continued some studies of a less specialised character. As a rule, the exam will be taken about two years after the Senior Local Examination, or some similar exam."

By 1920, the Certificate gained for passing the Senior Local Examination, the 'Senior Certificate' was "also called a 'School Certificate'", according to the regulations. The 1921 Regulations describe the Senior Exam as having been recognised by the Board of Education as an approved first examination and say that "a certificate of having passed the SLE is known as a 'School Certificate'". Finally, in 1923, the changeover is completed when the Regulations say: "The title 'Oxford Senior Local Examination' has been changed to 'Oxford School Certificate Examination'".

The original plan of the Delegates with the Senior Examination for a Preliminary Exam and Sections developed into the compulsory English Language and Group system of the School Certificate Exam. All such requirements were abolished in 1951 with the advent of GCE, which is a straight subject examination. The School Certificate became 'O Level' and the Higher School Certificate became 'A Level'.

### What did the title of 'Associate in Arts' actually mean?

There was much debate in 1857 about the introduction of the title. The Reverend E Hawkins, Provost of Oriel College, wrote to the Vice Chancellor saying that the AA implied too much and that he could not condone the conferral of a 'quasi degree for life upon young men of eighteen into whose character we make no inquiry and about whose religious knowledge we may be uninformed, simply because they have passed an exam in mere rudiments of knowledge of other kinds'. He also questioned the University's legal right to confer a title on those who were not in any sense members of the University.

The Reverend F Temple, Fellow of Balliol College, who argued vociferously for the title, claimed that the two main objections to it were: 1) that conceited young men would use the name of Oxford to parade themselves before the world; and 2) that a title would interfere with the value of the BA degree.

In answer to 1), Temple said that one reason which induced him to propose that Oxford should undertake this work, was the conviction that she would win a host of adherents all over the country, proud of her name and zealous for her prosperity. As for 2), he said that there was not the slightest reason to fear this danger. If one was to refuse the title AA, then one might as well refuse the whole idea of the Senior Exam class list in case it damaged the Oxford honours awarded to undergraduates. 'The different age of candidates,' he said, 'and the consequent difference in standard, as well as the different character of the Examination means that it would be impossible for the proposed class list to dim the lustre of our Honours or for the title to damage the estimation of our BA.'

He further argued that a first class AA was not equal to a first class BA and in being aware of the distinction, the public could learn to appreciate what the Oxford BA gives over and above mere knowledge.

The title would make the examination more popular because parents would value a title connecting their children with Oxford and would eagerly seek it.

The reasoning behind formation of the title was as follows: "'Associate' signifies a kind of affiliation, without the privileges of complete membership. 'In Arts' defines more particularly the relationship of the title to our Degree, as it could only rank below BA. An Association without any further qualification might seem to rank anywhere eg considered parallel to Master and Doctor. 'In Arts' also reflects the liberal slant to the examination 'in literis Anglicis, in Historia, in Linguis, in Mathematica, in Scientiis Phisicis et in ceteris artibus quae ad juventutem liberaliter educandam pertinent.'"

Acland, Fellow of All Souls summarised the difference between AA and BA thus: "The University will have to set its mark on two distinct kinds of education. It will confine, as heretofore, all academical privileges to the finished education of English gentlemen, members of its own corporation, to whom it stands in relation of 'Alma Mater'. Between itself and those outside its doors, who are not incorporated, but aggregated, it proposes to establish the relationship of a 'Clientela'. In the second class as well as the first will be found persons admitted to the society of gentlemen; both will have passed such an examination as will detect the ordinary failures of

uneducated men. The term Arts, as indicating general or preparatory education has always stood in marked contrast to Sciences or Professional studies; association is clearly distinguishable from matriculation.... If the University means to give a certificate, it must be a certificate of merit and therefore honourable and acceptable... On the one hand, the social prestige, which at present attaches to residence in the Universities, will clearly not belong to the Associates. On the other hand, there is little reason to fear that the title will be borne by many persons occupied in retail trade.”

### Sources

Delegacy of Local Examinations centenary brochure 1857–1957

Delegacy of Local Examinations 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary brochure 1857–1982

TD Acland’s ‘Some account of the origin and object of the new Oxford examinations for the title of AA, and certificates for 1858’ (Lond.&c. 1858) 232 a.2

*Report of the Committee on Middle Class Examinations* (Oxford 1857) GA Oxon b.29

With Appendix of letters and memorials, including:

F. Temple’s letter to the master of Pembroke in favour of AA

E. Hawkin’s letter to the Vice Chancellor against AA

Hebdomadal Council Papers for 1913, No.94 (OUA HC/1/1/94 p329ff)

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