

A-levels Forever

An exploration of the reasons for A-levels' resistance to change

by

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Abstract

In this study I conducted qualitative exploratory research into A-levels. In particular I examined why A-levels appear to be resistant to replacement or even abolition proposals such as, for example, the recommendations from the Tomlinson Report (2004). The aim of the research was to consider the advantages and disadvantages of A-levels, and, in so doing, to identify the particular characteristics of A-levels that may be responsible for their 50 years-plus endurance. In addition, I review the possible alternatives and what might be the future for A-levels. The study was designed with a focus on the views and experiences of influential stakeholders who work in the field of A-levels: schools, university admission administrators, academic researchers and government advisors. Data were gathered through a variety of methods: document analysis, focus group and interviews.

The main finding that emerged from the data indicated that A-levels have a paradoxical nature. One of their biggest perceived advantages (depth of the curriculum and early specialisation) is also one of their biggest disadvantages, when viewed from an alternative standpoint. There were three key themes that could explain A-levels' resistance to change over the years. First is the issue of standards, with the A-level as the symbolic 'gold standard', and the government's reluctance to risk upsetting the comparability of standards. Second is the lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications, which underpins A-levels' popularity with the public through their perceived elitism. Third, A-levels' role as a selective tool for university is difficult to reconcile when they are also the dominant qualification for secondary schooling. The study concluded with my discussion of how these three main reasons fit in the policy making model as proposed by Ball (1990).

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Reflective statement

For as long as I remember, I was interested in education. I was born in former Yugoslavia, where I lived until 1994. All education was free, fully funded by the state, including the universities. The school I attended was a Gymnasium (comparable to English grammar school), an academic school that prepares learners for university, ending with a Matura test. I left for the UK in order to continue with my studies, and after obtaining an undergraduate and Master's degree, I settled here. I have spent the last decade working for the QCDA (at various points QCA, NAA, and Ofqual). From the very beginning I was fascinated with A-levels, at times incredulous and sometimes envious that one was required to study *only* 3-4 subjects! Having spent the last two and a half years working on my thesis, my fascination with A-levels remains just as strong.

In October 2005 I started my Doctor in Education (EdD) course. At the time I was looking for a programme at the doctoral level which I could balance with my work commitments and that would be based on my interest in education. At work I was responsible for monitoring GCSE and A-levels delivery, and conducting research in this area. My hope for the EdD was to discover more about contemporary issues in educational research and familiarise myself with policies and studies in various areas of education. In addition, I was expecting to develop my own research skills and to become more confident in various research methodologies. I am certain that I have achieved this: my knowledge of educational issues has increased significantly and I am now familiar with several new policies and studies within the field; and the course has enabled me to enhance my research skills through a combination of studying further theory and the practical application of such theories.

My own background is in objectivist epistemology and more specifically in a positivist theoretical approach that deals with observable and 'scientific' data. I studied psychology, where great emphasis was placed on experimental conditions and measurement. At work, most of the research I conducted was concerned with using quantity as a way of 'proof' (how many people said what; how significant is the difference between the two groups, etc). I have always felt that this approach is efficient and useful when trying to examine whether something is significant, but

I never found it sufficient in answering why that may be the case. I have focused much more on qualitative data and a constructivist approach during my time studying for the EdD, and I am confident that I can now use both approaches successfully.

The Foundations of Professionalism in Education (FOP) module was our first one and I thoroughly enjoyed it. The debates were active and lively, providing a positive forum for the sharing of experiences and different views of what it means to be a professional within the educational context. My assignment, *Creating a New Professional identity: The case of the National Assessment Agency (NAA)*, was a valuable exercise as it made greater sense to consider these issues in my own organisation. The assignment focused on the difficulties that many non-departmental public bodies like the QCDA face, such as the balance between the business requirements of the organisation and providing an unbiased service for the benefit of the public.

The second module, Methods of Enquiry 1 (MoE1), was concerned with the theoretical and conceptual issues in educational research. I have learned a great deal about perspectives in educational research, the importance of the political and social context and in particular I gained an understanding of the theoretical frameworks and epistemologies that I was unfamiliar with before. The main difficulty was to position my research questions within a specific theoretical location, something that I rarely had to do for my work research - it highlighted the difference between academic and practitioner research even more. For my assignment, I wrote a proposed option for my IFS, *The Evaluation of the NAA programme in terms of modernising the exam process*.

In the second year of the programme, Methods of Enquiry 2 (MoE2), the third module overall, was divided into three sections: introduction to research, data collection and data analysis techniques. The additional computing workshops dedicated to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data were also very useful and operated at a pleasing challenging level. My assignment, *The consultation of the NAA User Panels on the satisfaction with awarding bodies' provision of service*, developed and pre-tested a questionnaire, together with an on-line forum discussion, and was designed to question exam officers about the quality of service provided by awarding bodies to schools and Colleges. It followed on from my previous assignment about modernising the exam process.

The last term of the second year, was Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment module. The focus of the module was on using psychoanalytic perspectives to make sense of education and educational research. I chose this module for two main reasons. Firstly, my background is in psychology and I was interested in refreshing some of my previous knowledge. Secondly, this was an opportunity for me to practice using a specific theoretical perspective and apply it in a different methodological framework. My assignment was entitled *Education and the construction of identity: IB vs. A-levels system*. The focus of the study was to use a psychosocial approach to better understand how my personal preference for the IB over the A-levels system had developed. This was an issue that was relevant to my work, as many lessons can be learned from a thorough understanding of the alternatives.

The four assignments outlined above all loosely related to each other and in particular to my professional practice. My main overall research interest was in the work of the QCDA as a bridge between the government, and its policies, and the schools and centres (and ultimately learners) as users. All four assignments have explored the relationship between the DfE and QCDA, and enabled me to learn more about the complex nature of independent public organisations that are sponsored by the government. As the modules went by I became more confident about my research skills, and learned more about the role of context that academic research provides when dealing with government policies. I've also had an opportunity to improve my writing and presenting of my work at a doctoral level.

The third year of the EdD was based on conducting an Institution Focused Study (IFS), with the objective of studying an institution concerned with educational provision, organisation and support and with which we are professionally connected - in my case, this was my own employing institution, the QCDA. My IFS was an evaluation of the Regulatory and Delivery Impact Assessments (RADIAs) process at the QCDA. I conducted a formative process evaluation to review the effectiveness of the RADIAs process as a policy tool at the QCDA. The additional aim of the evaluation was to consider the future of the process itself since it is currently only used for impact assessing 14-19 qualifications reforms, but may be extended to all projects within the QCDA. Data were gathered through a variety of methods: a focus group, questionnaire and interviews. The study concluded with a suggestion that RADIAs are not necessarily the right tool for policy implementation

monitoring. In addition, the study discussed the relationship between policy making and policy implementation through the relationship between the DfE and the QCDA.

Continuing in the area of 14-19 qualifications, I wanted the focus of my thesis to be on the way that the government makes decisions on education policies. I have chosen to research the A-level examination system, and to attempt to identify the reasons why A-levels are not being replaced with other qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) or the 14-19 Diplomas. The choice of the topic was fitting as I have previously undertaken studies into the difference between A-levels and the IB for my Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment course. Moreover, monitoring the risks to the general qualifications system (the stability of which could be jeopardised by any change) was part of my job at the QCDA. The thesis proposal meeting was very helpful in helping me clarify the focus and scope of my thesis.

This thesis has provided me with an opportunity to try different approaches to data collection, and extend my understanding of research methodology. I have gained more practice in conducting research within the constructivist approach that is oriented towards the exploration of participants' thoughts, views and comments, told in their own words. I wanted narrative and words, rather than quantitative data, and I was very glad to have the opportunity to work with qualitative data and to fully experience the richness of interviews. The interviews themselves were incredibly interesting and I may continue to explore them further. Therefore, my thesis was an act of learning, and it helped me ensure that I was not confined within a particular approach that may have been too restrictive.

In addition, the last few years spent on my studies taught me a great deal about the changing nature of any social phenomena under study. The structure of A-levels, their major policies, and general public opinion about them have all demonstrably changed in the few years I studied them. Because of the change of government in 2010, their policies were being reviewed at the time of writing this thesis, making it extremely complex to ensure my thesis is relevant and up to date. However, my conviction about the special status of A-levels deepened – whilst other qualifications and policies were immediately changed (e.g. stopping further work on the Diplomas, proposing new changes to GCSE system), A-levels (as yet)

remain untouched. I find it comforting to see that there is a general acceptance that there are no 'quick fixes' for them.

Overall, the research based components of the course (the IFS and thesis) have provided a very practical opportunity to conduct studies that are of both personal and professional interest and were an evolution of my ideas, knowledge and understanding of a wider context. In terms of how my ideas and my academic thinking developed in relation to the thesis, it has very much been influenced by what I have learned, the assignments I completed, and the feedback I received. As a result of my studies I have adopted a more critical and research based approach in all my work. My 'expertise' in relation to the examination process is increased, as is my ability to advise and liaise with the others who are working in the same field. In addition, as there is no pre-existing research of the type that I undertook into the reasons for maintaining A-levels, this research provides an original contribution to the debate on A-levels vs. alternative qualifications.

In conclusion, the EdD programme has been of great benefit to me and my professional progress and development. The EdD has enabled me to reflect on my practice by engaging with relevant theoretical perspectives and academic literature. I was also fortunate to interview some very high-profile people in the field, enabling me to develop good networks. I believe that my thesis is a piece of practitioner research that is not only applicable to my own professional practice, but also makes a distinct contribution to broader professional and academic knowledge. It was an excellent opportunity for me to develop my professional confidence and as a result I showed greater initiative at work and raised my profile as an independent researcher amongst my colleagues. Even though I no longer work for the QCDA, due to its imminent closure, my own professional development was greatly enhanced by completion of my thesis and I am convinced it will assist me in my future work plans. I am hoping to continue with educational research, with a focus on the 14-19 qualification area. I have greatly enjoyed the nearly six years it has taken to reach this stage.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 1 provides the background of the research, in order to explain how I chose A-levels as the topic for my thesis. It then explains the rationale for the research, as this is an important and interesting area, which I had several reasons to investigate. The section after that describes the aims of the research and, in particular, what were the research questions for this study. I end the chapter by introducing the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background of the research

One of the projects I worked on most recently at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) was to conduct the impact assessments on the new and revised 14 – 19 qualifications developments following the reforms set out in the 2005 White Paper *14-19 Education and Skills*. Despite many changes to the 14-19 qualifications, the A-level system was maintained subject to some changes (reducing the number of units from six to four; incorporating a 'stretch and challenge' part into assessment; introducing A* into the grading scale; and reducing the amount of internal assessment). Because 14-19 qualifications reform was based on the recommendations made by the Tomlinson Enquiry report (2004), and since that report proposed that A-levels should be replaced by a unified qualification system, I was interested in exploring the reasons why this recommendation was not implemented but was rejected by the then Labour government.

I conducted this study to explore in depth the views of influential stakeholders on A-levels and to research the reasons for continuing with the current system – something that was not done previously. The objective of the study was to investigate the reasons behind continuing with A-levels, based on the views and opinions of the experts in the field (e.g. government advisors on 14-19, academic researchers in the field) and those that are on the receiving end of the policy (e.g. schools and universities). My initial literature review implied that there may be some tension and differences in the views of the policy makers and users of the policy. It is hoped that this thesis sheds some light on the complex nature of the examination system, specifically the perceived future of A-levels, and that it will feed into the formal review of 14-19 reform that will take place in 2013.

Data was collected during 2009, under a Labour government and before the general election and change of government. The thesis was written in the context of then current policies (mid-2010). At the time of the writing, no major policy changes have been announced to the post-16 qualifications area. According to the Department for Education (DfE), the government aims to introduce new arrangements for A-levels, giving universities more say in qualifications development, but no official announcements about the changes have been made yet (DfE, 2010). Even though the government referred to is the United Kingdom government, the focus of the thesis is purely on the England's post-16 qualification system mainly because Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have different qualification regulators in place. This is also because the EdD thesis inevitably must have a limited scope.

1.2 Rationale for the research

In accordance with conducting professional doctoral research, I ensured that there were rationales for doing this research. For this study, I identified three related rationales, presented as three levels – level one is related to my personal professional interest, level two is concerned with my work at QCDA, and the third level concerns a wider professional educational context. Firstly, A-levels are of great professional interest to me as I have worked in the area of the 14-19 programme for the last 10 years, and yet I only became familiar with A-levels once I started working for QCA (as QCDA was called at the time). This made me interested in their unique nature, in particular whether studying three to four subjects was sufficient as either a preparation for university or as a secondary education. How good were they? Who was doing it better – Europe or the UK?

Secondly, I think it is important to understand A-levels from the point of view of the people directly involved in dealing with them i.e. higher education (HE) admission administrators, qualifications developers, academic researchers, awarding bodies, and schools. I had read several studies that presented the views of learners and the general public. However, because I wanted to understand the reasons behind the decision to continue with A-levels, I decided that the focus should be on the professionals in the field who may understand this issue differently. I hoped to ascertain through my research approach a less official, but perhaps more transparent and honest, view. Whilst the government makes a final decision on the future of A-levels, I wanted to hear what those most directly influencing these

decisions thought of them. Through exploring the government's reasons for maintaining the current system, this study contributes to our knowledge about how the government makes decisions on educational policy.

Lastly, in terms of the educational context, I am confident that this study is contributing to professional knowledge in the area of A-levels, which is relevant to many: learners, parents, universities, future employers, government departments, exams regulators, and the many organisations whose livelihood depends on them (awarding bodies, exams officers, etc). The study can potentially contribute to future wider debate on the exams system or policies within the QCDA and the DfE: particularly the formal review of 14-19 qualifications reform in 2013. I hope that by exploring the reasons why A-levels remain, the educational community is better informed on deciding what, if any, changes are needed in the future.

I return to these rationales again in my conclusion, in order to reflect on how fully they have been met by my research.

1.3 Aims of the research

The aim of my research was to explore the possible reasons behind the decision to maintain the A-level system following Tomlinson's review (2004) recommendations. Were they political or pragmatic? Therefore the main research question was:

- In the view of influential stakeholders¹, what were the reasons for the government to maintain the A-level system?

I address the main question by reviewing the following sub-questions:

- What did influential stakeholders think are the advantages and disadvantages of A-levels?
- What makes A-levels so resistant to change?
- Did the stakeholders think A-levels should be replaced with another qualification? If so, what options are possible?

¹ The influential stakeholders are policy makers, policy advisors, policy implementers, and users such as awarding bodies, schools, and universities

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured in 8 chapters. Firstly, there is a literature review which will present the current literature on A-levels. This helps contextualise the study in terms of its topic. The third chapter discusses the methodological approach of the study, research design where issues concerning sampling and data collection are presented, as well as the ethical issues. The second part of the thesis is devoted to my own data. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the research, and the following three chapters (5, 6 and 7) discuss the essence of the findings in light of other studies and relate them back to the original research questions. The thesis concludes by summarising the main findings and discussing their implications within the three rationale aspects presented earlier. Some thoughts on future research are presented.

I begin my thesis by presenting a short literature review.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

This literature review is relatively brief, used mainly to contextualise my research, with further relevant literature being intertwined into the findings sections. Mostly my focus was on literature from England and mainly covers publications from the last ten years – in order to make it as relevant, up-to-date, and as concise as possible. Certain historic literature is used when thought necessary to illustrate the point (i.e. to indicate how certain views have remained constant over years). As this is a professional doctorate, I draw on a wide range of publications that I have come across in my professional work - from right-wing think tanks reports such as Reform to various Labour government commissioned reports, as well as academic studies in the field.

In the first part of my literature review, I provide an overview of A-levels, and summarise the main topics and major criticisms raised by various historical reviews and reforms. All of these issues are discussed more fully in the later chapter in relation to my own data and are used to explore the reasons behind A-levels' resistance to change.

The second part of my literature review is focused on the role of politics in English education, particularly in the relationship between the economy of the country and its education policies. This relationship is an important part of the link between A-levels (and how decisions about them are made) and the government in power. It contextualises the role A-levels play in the government's emphasis on England's position in international comparison tables framed within the standards debate. Within this section, I also review the relationship between education and political ideologies, since A-levels are of immense importance to many stakeholders who may have different interests at heart.

2.1 Overview of A-levels

Post-16 qualifications in England are organised into three main routes - academic, vocational and apprenticeships. The routes are relatively inflexible, with little shared and common properties (Pring et al, 2009). The dominant route is academic. Nuffield Review (NR, 2008) summarises English post-16 academic education as having five defining features. These are that this stage:

1. is qualifications-led and dominated by A Levels,

2. is selective,
3. has an 'elective' nature allowing learner considerable choice in terms of individual qualifications,
4. is focused on individual subject rather than being an overall programme of study, and
5. has little curriculum breadth.

All of these features will be described in the following paragraphs.

After obtaining General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications at 16, learners who achieve appropriate results and choose to continue with academic education mainly proceed to study for a General Certificate of Education (GCE) – or A-levels. A-levels are generally accepted as the most recognised English qualification both here and abroad. They were introduced in 1951, replacing the Higher School Certificate. They were originally designed as a qualification for the small minority of learners who were planning to go to university. Today, over 40 per cent take A-levels, compared to 17 per cent taking level three vocational qualifications (Pring et al, 2009). There is an upward trend in the numbers of those in full time education, and developments such as raising the school leaving age to 18 in 2015 will create a further increase in demand for qualifications. In 2008, 1.5 million learners achieved GCE qualifications compared to 1.21 million in 2003 (Ofqual, 2009).

Before the Curriculum 2000 reform, the old style 'linear' A-level was based on learners being assessed on their A-level subject at the end of the two-year course. The Curriculum 2000 reforms changed the structure of the A-levels by introducing modular A-levels. Further changes to A-level's structure were implemented in 2008. Today, A-levels consist mainly of four units, which are examined in isolation after each unit is studied. Two or three of the units are studied and examined during the first year (Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level) and, if they so choose, learners continue with the rest of the units during the second year (Advanced (A2) level), after which an A-level is awarded. Learners will typically study four AS subjects in their first year, and then continue with three of them in year two, to convert them into full A-levels (QCDA, 2009).

A-levels have both summative and predictive functions – they are an assessment of attainment at the end of the sixth form stage of education and the most

important element in selection for university entrance (Kingdon, 1991). As a gateway to Higher Education (HE), they form the basis for decisions on which course, and more importantly, at which university, a learner will be offered a place. Learners choose which subjects to study at A-level, as long as it is offered by their school. The subjects are mainly chosen in line with the learner's career aspirations and by the entry requirements of the university to which they intend subsequently to apply (Newton, 2007). In addition, A-levels are used as a secondary school qualification for many others who do not go on to university. This means that A-levels serve a dual function, which they were not originally designed to do – in essence, an 'exclusive method has been adapted to a mass market' (Edwards, 1997, p.3). One of the issues with this method is that as a study of a few individual subjects, A-levels do not provide an overall programme of study that may be more useful for secondary school education (NR, 2008).

One of the main values cited for A-levels is their subject specialisation, where immersion in the subject and independent critical thinking prepare learners for university study (Edwards et al, 1997; Bassett et al, 2009). However, arguably this may result in a narrow education overall, with compartmentalized and fragmented knowledge. Moreover, such specialism in only a few subjects may impose narrowness upon the curriculum that may have a detrimental effect in the future (Kingdon, 1991) if certain subjects are avoided by many learners. Furthermore, this early specialisation is at odds with England's counterparts in Europe (The Independent, 1997). The Institute for Public Policy Research (1993) suggested nearly twenty years ago avoiding the early specialisation seen in learners studying up to ten subjects in their GCSEs and then choosing only three or four to continue with as A-levels.

Another major criticism of A-levels is the argument that A-levels are not what they used to be decades ago. They have undergone significant structural change and many more learners now take them - one in three of the age cohort, as opposed to one in thirty when A-levels began (The Independent, 1997). As more learners take A-levels, they became inappropriate in respect of both curriculum and standard for the new cohort (Tattersall, 2007). As Hodgson and Spours (2008) write

every year in August, the media raises concerns about declining standards and there is a rehearsal of a bizarre English ritual. Employers' complain about young people's lack of basic skills at 16+. Universities lament 18-year-olds' inability to construct

extended pieces of writing and bemoan the difficulties of selecting the 'most able' young people for prestigious courses. (p.39)

Therefore, as the Nuffield Review (2008) argues, there is a crisis of general education that needs to be recognised. They cite several reasons. In terms of A-levels, as a selective qualification, it leads some learners into 'alternative' vocational provision, which by implications may be perceived as second best. The focus on examinations encourages mechanical and instrumental learning and an individual subject approach narrows and fragments the curriculum, leaving many learners insufficiently challenged by it. This focus on examinations is further increased by the use of league tables, putting pressure on schools and teachers. They argue that the main objectives of the 14-19 phase should be to produce fully rounded and educated 19 year olds, and this requires a fundamental debate about the values and purposes of this stage of education.

All of these issues have been raised before, and as I present in the next section, A-levels have therefore gone through several major reviews and reform processes.

2.1.1 Reviews and reforms of A-levels

Even though A-levels have existed since the 1950s, and have resisted major reform, it is important to note that they have undergone several changes and have been modified in various ways. As noted earlier, the biggest structural change was the move from linear to modular A-levels and staged assessment after Curriculum 2000. A-level development has also seen an increase in the number of subjects offered, changes to the proportion of internal and external assessment, and changes to the number of constituent units (for a detailed history of A-levels see Hodgson and Spours, 2011). Therefore when I talk about their resistance to change, I refer to a system, a programme of study, with characteristics described in the previous section, and in particular with regard to the separation of the post-16 curriculum within secondary education.

Young (1998) argues that three features of social organization have had a particular role in making A-levels so resistant to change:

1. the autonomy of schools over what they offer,
2. the learners freedom to choose what to study, and

3. the freedom of universities to use whatever selection criteria they want.

In addition, A-levels are also deep-seated in the English schooling tradition, especially the tradition of educating the elite (Graham and Tytler, 1993). Much of the opposition in the past decade to reforming A-levels has come from those in authority who themselves took A-levels, and who do not want to tamper with the 'gold standard' of the education system (The Independent, 1997). The public confidence in, and the teaching profession's familiarity with, the system is still strong (Ofqual, 2009). Therefore, change is resisted. However, this has not stopped A-levels being under constant scrutiny.

Higham et al (1996) suggest that A-levels have always been on trial, especially with regard to their specialised nature.

Proposed solutions of interested parties have ranged from abolition to renovation, though only rarely have proposals gained governmental acknowledgement, let alone approval or action.
(p.44)

Despite many attempts at reform, changes to the system have been minimal, as government continues to avoid major overhaul of the system. As Fisher (2007) suggests, there exists

the reluctance of both Conservative and Labour administrations to abandon the so-called 'gold standard' of A-levels. The new Labour government, elected in 1997, also remained committed to A-level, although in modified form. (p.104)

As Kingdon (1991) succinctly summarises

the most significant feature of the various attempts to reform the structure of the A-level examination is their number. (p 49)

It is interesting that despite many of these reviews, no major changes to post-16 education as a whole have occurred. Is that because there is no need for a change, or perhaps that political pragmatism – perhaps in the form of risk avoidance and focus on re-election and keeping influential stakeholders happy - is a dominant feature of every government's administration?

The most well-known government reviews in the past twenty-five years include the Higginson Report (1988), Dearing Report (1996) and the Tomlinson Report

(2004). My interest is particularly in A-levels post-Tomlinson review, but since mid-way through writing this thesis we had a change of government (from the Labour to the Coalition); I have also included the Sykes Review (2010). This review was commissioned by the Conservatives whilst they were in opposition. Some of its features have influenced the Coalition government White Paper (DfE, 2011).

The three major concerns that most of the reviews have highlighted are:

1. concerns about the narrowness of A-levels and the need for a broader programme of study;
2. the lack of comparable esteem between academic and vocational education; and
3. ways of increasing level of participation in further and higher education.

In addition, the issue of A-levels' standards and their ability to discriminate between learners is usually raised. It is not hard to see how many of these concerns are in direct opposition to each other. It would be difficult to increase A-levels' selectivity function whilst increasing the number of learners taking them. The ultimate decision on A-level reform rests with the government and, so far, government has resisted the pressure to change the system in a major way, preferring to 'tinker' with the existing qualifications.

As noted, I am particularly interested in the Tomlinson Report, which was published in 2004, having examined different ways of improving the 14-19 education. One of the main recommendations was a proposal to replace the existing qualifications such as GCSE, A-levels and vocational examinations with a unified overarching diploma, consisting of a generic core and main learning, and offered at four levels of attainment. Overarching Diplomas would have included academic, vocational and practical elements, challenging the existing academic and vocational divide. The report received, almost uniquely, widespread acceptance across the state and independent sectors of education, and among employer organisations. In the White Paper that followed (DfES, 2005) the Labour government did not accept the proposal to substitute A-levels with a unified overarching diploma. Instead, they introduced the 14-19 Diplomas alongside the existing and modified system.

There have been many reasons offered why the Tomlinson proposal was not accepted. Hodgson and Spours (2011) suggest that the proposed unified diploma system would

subsume all types of learning and qualifications within a single framework, together with a much greater accent on the role of professionals in the assessment process. If these reforms had been adopted, they would have represented a marked departure from the English general education tradition insofar as they could have led to a more curriculum-focused and less bureaucratic and divided approach to general education. Perhaps it is for this reason the Tomlinson recommendations were not implemented. (p.207)

This lack of 'settled will' (Pring et al, 2009, p.189) in England as to how to reform 14-19 education and training was explained by the Labour government as the need to ensure stability of the system. Carol Hunter, from the DfES 14-19 Implementation and Communications Division, said

GCSEs and A-levels will remain as free-standing qualifications. Who could fail to see that? It has been trailed a lot in the press. Apart from the changes that I've already covered, we're not proposing to make many further changes immediately to GCSEs and A-levels. Ministers felt that there needed to be some areas of stability in the system, that these were qualifications that were largely fit-for-purpose, and it was important to maintain them relatively unchanged for the time being. (The Westminster Education Forum, 2005, p.15)

It seems that government felt that changes would have been a political threat to the current system and to A-levels with their well-understood status and recognised standards (Pring, 2008). In addition, Pring et al (2009) suggest that another reason was that government was committed to the principle of choice. They hoped that having more qualifications to choose from would achieve broadening of opportunity and that the choice would also stimulate the market (awarding bodies and the independent sector) by increasing interest in other qualifications. There are no indications that the current Coalition government is planning on changing the system. For those who do not (or cannot) continue with A-levels, as Pring (2008) suggests there are always the constantly evolving (and usually short-lived) vocational routes.

The question as to why A-levels are so difficult to reform is not new. Young (1998) writes about the history of A-level changes, suggesting that A-level reforms in the

1960s and 1970s failed because those involved did not have a clear idea of what alternatives might be. Since then, reforms have failed because successive governments had political and ideological interest in preserving them. Indeed, Hodgson and Spours (2003) agree, stating that

reforming A-levels is difficult because they are the dominant qualification in the English qualifications-led education and training system. They have been around for over 50 years, are highly politicised, and have been used by successive governments as the 'gold standard.' (p.81)

It is their image of being a gold standard that contributes to A-levels being so resistant to change. As Kingdon (1991) suggests, any proposals for major structural reform of them tend to be treated as 'semi-sacreligious' (p 2).

I am interested in exploring this issue further. The controversy about replacing A-levels with a more baccalaureate style diploma is not new, but the Tomlinson Report (2004) was the first time that the proposal had such wide support from many in the educational community. So what is so sacred about A-levels in the English psyche that prevented the Labour government from following through fully on Tomlinson's recommendations? Is it because A-levels are too politically important and too complex to risk playing with? Have, as the media would suggest, many stakeholders lost their confidence in A-levels' ability to select the best learners and at the same time provide the overall certificate of educational achievement of mainstream learners? If so, why? I aim to explore the reasons why A-levels are still the dominant post-16 qualification in England, and why they have been so difficult to reform (let alone replace with another qualification) over the years.

The following part of this chapter focuses on the role of politics in English education, in order to contextualise the way that the government makes policy decisions on A-levels.

2.2 The role of politics in English education

Ball (1990) writes about education policy being a result of complex relationships and contradictions in economic, political and ideological spheres, where it is impossible to separate the influence of one over the other. The economic sphere

relates to issues of funding, as well as the link between education and productivity of the country; the political sphere relates to the consideration of the forms of governance of education, where certain groups are more influential than others in the policy process; and the ideological sphere considers the way policy is presented and used to strengthen dominant culture. I focus on these relationships in the next two sections: firstly on the relationship between education and the economy; and secondly on the relationship between education and political ideology, since as my research shows, politics and ideology are often conflated and difficult to separate.

2.2.1 The relationship between education and the economy

Education is often perceived as a key resource in the development of a vibrant knowledge economy on which the future of a country depends (Fielding, 2001). The idea of a 'knowledge economy' is based on the principle that a knowledgeable and skilled workforce will result in a 'better' and more productive workforce; hence increasing the economic competitiveness of the country as a whole. Hodgson et al (2011) suggest that the Labour government pursued managerialist, neo-liberal policies, where in order to achieve high economic competitiveness, the focus was on developing skills. Keep (2011) also writes about this neo-liberal system of beliefs, where the globalisation, free market and the need for human capital, has led the Labour government to focus on skills development through education. Ball (2007) summarises the issue:

among many dimensions, there is most obviously the subordination of education to the competitive pressures of the global market and the attempt in the UK, and elsewhere, to facilitate a 'knowledge economy.' (p.189)

As Young (1998) writes, people are economic actors and as a result, economies will determine education systems. Globalisation has become a major factor in motivating countries to reform their education systems. The aim is to ensure their competitiveness and the availability of a highly skilled workforce that can meet the demands of knowledge driven and high technology industries (Rotberg, 2004). Hatcher (2008) agrees that one of the key Labour's themes in education policy was how it relates to Britain's economic competitiveness. He writes

For roughly the first half of the Blair government's period of office the dominant theme was the 'standards agenda'. The rationale was that a general improvement in pupil attainment through 'school improvement' would be the principal means of furnishing the labour power potential which the economy was deemed to need. (p.666)

Ball (2008) argues that the knowledge economy, in which knowledge and education are presented as a business product (rather than public good) and the primary wealth-creating asset, commodify knowledge, whilst denying the social aspect of education. Higham and Yeomans (2011) agree that when the dominant policy discourse is economic, with the focus on the development of human capital, a consequence of this approach is that curriculum debate is not fully appreciative of the cultural, social, political and personal aims that should influence curriculum policies. It is questionable whether the purpose of education should be based on the economic needs of economy country. The value of the knowledge-based economy, and consequently a need for a prescriptive learning, has been questioned by many (Pring et al, 2009).

Critics of the knowledge economy use university as an example: a degree may be perceived as a commodity to be exchanged for a job rather than as a liberal education that prepares learners for life (Ball, 2008). And yet, academic achievement is the basis for a meritocratic society and social mobility, with graduates earning seventy-seven per cent more than non-graduates (OECD, 2007). The Leitch Review of Skills projected a 50 per cent increase in the share of highly skilled occupations, such as managers and professionals, and a decrease in low skilled occupations by 2020 (Bassett et al, 2009). Since education has such high importance in determining an individual's life chances and prospects in the labour market (Wolf, 2002), it is understandable why it remains a high-profile concern, whichever party is in power (Wolf, 2004).

As a result, education has become a major political issue, forever interlinked with the issue of the country's economy in both the tangible (producer of skills and labour) and intellectual (producer of knowledge) sense (Ball, 2008). Resources are directed at reforms and policies that further connect the education system to the project of making our economy more competitive. However, as Pring et al (2009) have suggested, it is also important to question whether the reliance on education reform is part of a reluctance to address the question of the relationship between

education and the training system and the labour market. Should the purpose of education be to enable learners to get a well-paid job?

In terms of my thesis, my interest is whether one of the major advantages of A-levels is that, as an academic qualification, their value to government policies in relation to the 'knowledge economy' has contributed to their resistance to change. In addition, the fact that A-levels' standards could be monitored would be another advantage as it enables government to monitor and report progress on the education of young learners. Finally, A-levels enable learners to progress to university, which arguably could make them even more 'knowledgeable', thus further contributing to the knowledge reserves of the country. However, I am also interested whether apart from these 'economic' reasons, there are other, more political reasons for preserving the system? The following section focuses on this area in more detail.

2.2.2 The relationship between education and political ideologies

Ball (1990) writes that policies are based on values, and it is important to question whose values are validated by the existing policies, since they 'do not float free of their social context' (p.3). Since A-levels have existed for the last 50 years, and since, as Pring et al (2009) write, most of the reforms of the last 20 years have focused on preserving this system, one of the questions that I hope to answer is whose values are supported by permitting A-levels to remain? In addition, what are the reasons one would have to want them to remain? Could it be that they are simply the best post-16 qualification there is, supporting the values of those who decide on what should be taught and how? Is it the question of tradition, pride in a qualification that served so many well? Or could it be that those who make the policies are pragmatic and simply wish to maintain the status quo? In pragmatic terms, perhaps the focus of any government is on getting re-elected and they need the support of influential stakeholders for that. Therefore one could argue that it is better to avoid making risky changes to a system that is - by the simple fact of it being around for so long - established, familiar and understood.

Raffe and Spours (2007) suggest that a politicised education system has led to policy making being dominated by ideological and short-term political concerns. Barber (2001) writes that

In the modern world, though, electorates are fickle and impatient. ... They want immediate evidence that it is on the way. Hence the central paradox facing education reformers in a democracy: a long-term strategy will succeed only if it delivers short-term results.
(p.18-19)

Therefore perhaps no major reforms could risk destabilising a relatively successful system even for a short-time. No new policies could be endorsed by the government that might challenge the privileges and interests of those who are influential. It may be very difficult to make fundamental changes to the exam system without alienating those who are served by the system as it is. In the following few paragraphs, I focus on two such stakeholders in particular: middle-class parents and higher education.

Many have argued that the government's policies are influenced by political reasons such as their objective of maintaining middle-class allegiance to state education with the promise of greater school choice. For example, Edwards (1997) suggests that one needs to understand the traditionalism behind A-levels and their association with middle-class occupations in order to understand reluctance to change. The middle classes constitute the 'swing' vote that may decide modern election results (Whitty, 2002). Therefore they have to be placated in some way. They also need to deal with the 'paying twice' dilemma, namely that many parents would question why they should continue to pay for state schooling through taxation, if their children could experience more desirable educational opportunities outside the state system (Tooley, 2001) - over seven per cent of all learners attend independent schools (ISC, 2010).

Tooley (2001) writes that New Labour claimed a vision of a world class education that would keep the middle-class parents using the state sector and therefore would improve service provision for all. Their policy was that all learners would have access to A-levels. League tables serve as a form of market information for parents, promoting choice and competition. Some right-wing think tanks argue this policy had 'a strong undercurrent of anti-elitism' which is 'entirely artificial as Britain's elite educational institutions continue to exist and thrive' (Bassett et al, 2009, p.26). Others argue that the ideas of choice and specialisation in education have replaced the previous attempt of common and comprehensive schooling, increasing the differences between popular schools and reinforcing a vertical hierarchy of schooling types rather than producing the promised horizontal

diversity (Whitty, 2002). The evidence shows that, instead of benefiting the disadvantaged, this may actually increase the disadvantage (Whitty, 2002), as it is

just a more sophisticated way of reproducing traditional distinction between different types of school and between the people who attend them. (p.11-12)

Studies by Ball (1990, 2003), Bowe et al (1992), Gewirtz et al (1995), and Ball et al (1996), demonstrate that choice-focused policies increase social class segregation in schools. In addition, there have been societal changes (e.g. high rates of immigration), which may lead to further stratification of schooling (Rotberg, 2004). Different social groups deal with the choice available differently, and the evidence shows that choice systems in themselves promote inequality (Ball, 2008), because they create social spaces within which class strategies and 'opportunistic behaviours' can flourish. This benefits the middle-classes, because they are more likely to make the most of their social and cultural skills and capital (Ball, 2003). There is a difference in redistribution of possibilities rather than resources and, in such a social order, the privileged are bound to be able to confer advantages on their children and in the process destroy any hope of genuine meritocracy (Giddens, 1998).

However, Ball (1990) argues that policies are seldom representative of a single dominant interest (e.g. middle class parents) but rather a matrix of interests. As I am particularly interested in A-levels and their role as a stepping stone to university, I hope to examine further the relationship between higher education as a stakeholder, and the government. As Pring et al (2009) suggest, the latest, post-Tomlinson revisions to A-levels (such as the introduction of A* and the availability of the extended project) were focused most on the issues that are of interest to universities. At the same time as attempting to make A-levels arguably more difficult, the Labour government was promoting social inclusion and widening participation. However, Bathmaker et al (2008) describe the relationship between higher education and social inequality, questioning whether the increased participation at all costs changes anything, if selective, elite institutions stay the same, and new demand for places is met with fewer selective and elite universities.

Today, higher education remains polarised. In England, the proportion of learners from state schools attending prestigious universities has declined (Guardian,

2010). A recent report shows that top universities select over 30 per cent of learners from private schools (Sutton Trust, 2010). Nearly thirty years ago, Scott (1982) suggested that private schools lead to better academic achievement and are more likely to lead a learner to a selective university, followed with entry into high status occupation. What role do A-levels play in legitimising these differences? Do universities support this system? If so, is that one of the contributing factors in A-levels resistance to change?

The reason elite universities may resist any major changes to A-levels could be because they can control the current system in a way that serves their needs - for example by choosing which A-levels to demand for their courses. As a result, this ability to choose the criteria for their entrance requirements may favour certain social groups over the others. One example is science A-levels. State schools are less likely to do single subject science GCSEs (Guardian, 2009) thus reducing the possibility of learners continuing with specific science A-levels (such as Physics). Yet a review of the Imperial College undergraduate prospectus demonstrates that a significant number of the leading courses demand not just a Physics A Level – but at an A* grade (Imperial College, 2011), thereby disadvantaging state school learners in particular from access to that course.

Some publications have commented on the issue of the role A-levels play in social mobility, and in particular success in obtaining a place at a prestige university (e.g. Truss, 2011). The new Coalition government appears to be focused on the Sykes Review (2010) recommendations to restore the rigour of A-levels as a preparation for university study, emphasising their elite role. How much are these policies influenced by the universities themselves? Will these policies further increase the socially segregating role that A-levels already play in post-16 education, especially whilst vocational education status remains perceived as lower than academic. My thesis examines how these issues are perceived by a number of different stakeholders.

Therefore the focus of my thesis is to examine this matrix of interests that stakeholders have, and how they may oppose each other, in order to understand if that could be a possible reason why there have been no fundamental change to A-levels as a programme of study. Perhaps the policy makers have never wanted to abolish A-levels because they did not want to lose support of powerful stakeholders such as middle class voters. By making changes, policy makers

would have to give weight to some of these interests over others. Is it possible for a qualification to be exclusive and all-encompassing at the same time, and do stakeholders want that out of the post-16 education? Does the economy of the country need more people who are knowledgeable, or few who are knowledgeable in a certain way, and others who provide different type of contribution? Hopefully my findings shed some light on these issues.

Before discussing this topic in relation to my own data, I describe and justify my study in terms of its methodology and design. Ethical considerations relevant to this study are also summarised in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - Methodological approach

Chapter 3 has four distinct parts. The first part considers methodological and theoretical issues and discusses the epistemology of this study. The second part describes research design, and in particular the research questions, sampling and methods of data collection. In the third part I examine the validity and reliability of the study. Lastly, the fourth part focuses on ethical considerations that I faced during this research.

3.1 Methodological and theoretical considerations

There were several factors that I considered when choosing which methodological approach to adopt for this study. The most important of these was to choose the approach that was the most likely to provide me with the data to address my research questions. In addition, I wanted to conduct the research in the spirit of a specific philosophy and epistemology. Epistemology is inherent in the theoretical perspective and the research methodology. It may be objectivist – that assumes that the meaning is objective and not necessarily connected to consciousness and therefore it is just a question of finding it. It may be constructivist – suggesting that there is no one truth for all, but that truth is constructed out of one's engagement with the external world and therefore has to be personally experienced (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology also influences the decision on whether to take a qualitative or quantitative approach, or a combination of both. Cohen et al (2000) suggest the epistemology affects profoundly the way we research something. I knew that I wanted to adopt a qualitative approach to my data, because I was interested in people's perception of A-levels' resistance to change and their own experience.

Having spent years being trained and working in an objectivist epistemology, more specifically in a positivist theoretical approach that deals with observable and 'scientific' data, I wanted to try a different approach. The main reason for this was that I did not think that objective, 'hard', scientific data would have been helpful in answering my research questions. The very essence of my question was trying to understand why A-levels were resistant to change, and I do not think you can necessarily explain why with numerical data. I wanted narrative, the specific words of my participants, rather than quantity. I decided to approach this study from a constructivist perspective, where the truth is constructed out of the views,

experiences and opinions of people who know the A-level programme well, because they are personally involved in it in some way. It is their story I was interested in, not overall general statistics. It was also important for me as a researcher to try different approaches, as every research undertaking is an act of learning, and I have always found interviewing to be a rich and enjoyable experience.

Therefore my study is of a qualitative nature, concerned with participants' perceptions and experience of A-levels and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences. The conclusions are my interpretations of these perceptions. I think the qualitative approach provides a wider spectrum and gives more flexibility of inquiry, giving attention to the meanings and perspectives of participants. It also provides richness of detail about a much smaller number of people and cases that capture the essence of the phenomena under study. The basic assumption of a qualitative approach is that the researcher seeks to understand experiences from the perspective of the participants, i.e.

a carefully modulated account of events as seen from multiple points of view. (Weiss, 1998, p.262)

In my study it is a combination of approaches – a flow from an inductive approach to find out what the important questions and topics were (a focus group was used as an exploration) and then a deductive approach to confirm these explorations (through semi-structured interviews). This was followed by inductive analysis, to categorise the main findings, whilst looking for alternative explanations or unexplained findings.

I was influenced and inspired by a combination of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and an exploratory constructivist approach. I began this study with very few initial ideas, although not completely tabula rasa, because I did know what questions I wanted to ask. Following the gathering of the data, the themes about the reasons for maintaining A-levels emerged. In addition, the constructivist approach fitted well with the research questions as I was oriented towards exploration of participants' thoughts, views and comments of this particular subject, told in their own words. I remained an objective and distant researcher during the data collection, keeping my thoughts neutral, and letting the data speak for itself. I did this by using the constant-comparative method of coding: starting

with general coding and moving on to a more selective approach in the advanced stage (Lichtman, 2010). My data are exemplified by quotes, anecdotes and documentary records. I did not impose any pre-existing expectations on the results, and there were no constraints through predetermined analysis categories. Rather, I used the data to assist me with finding the unexpected and to guide me towards the conclusion.

As befits exploratory study, I have focused on looking for overarching themes – starting from analysing the first interview, to constantly comparing the variables: different groups, different categories, different themes, and different data sources. The idea was to move away from using the analysis to describe the data to using the analysis to find the relationship between data in order to construct overarching themes (Corbin and Holt, 2006). Reflexivity was extremely important. Whenever there was something lacking, I would go back to it, and seek further data. For example, I wanted to take account of the context about A-levels' relationship with politics. As a result, I spent a lot of time reviewing literature on the politicisation of education, and 'policy sociology' (Ball, 2008), and came across Ball's (1990) views on education policy making that presented a good model for contextualising my findings.

Mixed research methods (or data sources) were selected and used in order to capture and, to some extent, measure the thoughts and opinions of the participants. Although the main instrument of data collection for this study was a set of interviews, I also used focus groups as a first step to pilot the interviews and refine my interview schedule. Therefore, my methods involved: focus groups, interviews, and written documents such as questionnaires about A-levels. My reflection on each data collection method is presented in the following section of the thesis. My findings reflect thoughts from a select number of stakeholders on why we maintain A-levels as the primary post-16 academic route, but it cannot provide a full, comprehensive picture of the entire A-level programme, nor of 14-19 education.

3.2 Research design

Research design refers to the overall strategy used (Robson, 2000) and the decisions made about the various aspect of the study. In simplest terms, design is a formal plan - based on decisions concerning the following:

1. Research questions
2. Sampling and selecting participants
3. Methods of data collection

3.2.1 Research questions

The first step in conducting my research was to decide on the research questions. If design is the structure, then 'questions are the content of the study' (Weiss, 1998). The main focus of the research was to explore the views of participants on why we still have A-levels in England despite proposals, such as Tomlinson's review (2004), which suggest a different system. The research questions needed to reflect the key issues, whose answers would provide the most meaningful information. However, they still needed to be broad and open in order to allow me to take into account all relevant variables. The main objective of the questions was to review and judge the A-level programme based on the perceptions of those involved in the research. This can be operationalised through the combined answers to the following research questions:

- What did influential stakeholders think are the advantages and disadvantages of A-levels?
- What makes A-levels so resistant to change?
- Did they think A-levels should be replaced with another qualification? If so, what options are possible?

The methods for gathering and analysing data were based on these research questions.

3.2.2 Sampling and selecting participants

Before starting the data collection, it was necessary to decide on whom to talk to, and who would be the source of data. It was therefore important to decide on the sample, which would represent a population to which these findings can be applied. This study used theoretical sampling and the data collection was guided by emerging concepts. I continued the gathering of the data until I reached 'saturation point' (Corbin and Holt, 2006) when no new concepts were being discovered and emerging data appeared repetitive of the previous data. This

approach allowed for major strengths and weaknesses to be identified. It was important to ensure that the sample was sufficiently big to allow meaningful inferences to be drawn. However, the scope of the study does not allow for generalisation of these findings to the whole population of relevant stakeholders. All participation in the study was voluntary and the participants did not feel under pressure to take part. The purpose of the study was explained, and their consent to participate was obtained.

As a pilot for the later interviews, the study began with a focus group of eight QCDA colleagues, who were all involved with A-level work in some way. The purpose of this initial focus group was to establish broad concepts for the exploration of A-levels, and to refine the sampling criteria. The focus group identified two groups that were important to talk to – schools and HE representatives. I made a decision to omit employers in this study, as my focus was mainly on the role of A-levels as preparation for higher education rather than employment. As this was a professional doctorate thesis, I based my choice on my experience of conducting impact assessments for the new policies - the process which I reviewed for my Institution Focused Study. I therefore consulted the type of stakeholder that would have been included if I was conducting an impact assessment on A-levels future in my professional capacity.

Having interviewed these participants until I had a clear picture of the emerging concepts, I extended my interview sample to include two more groups – government advisors and A-level researchers. This was to ensure that my research was not skewed towards the views of the users of A-levels (schools who teach them and HE who use the results for their selection), but to also represent the views of those whose jobs were to understand A-levels from the advisory point of view. This way I could ensure that my research questions were answered in more detail.

The sample is divided into four parts, in order to facilitate easier data analysis and to improve the possibility of comparison later on. Therefore the study had the following, very distinctive groups, involved in the process:

- 4 School representatives (**S**) - a Head teacher of a prominent private school, a Principal of a 6th form college, a Head teacher of a private IB

school, and a teacher in a local community college. These were chosen on the basis of trying to obtain data from schools with different backgrounds.

- 6 HE representatives (**HE**) - Imperial College London, Institute of Education, University of London, University College London, Manchester University, and SOAS. These were chosen to represent those universities who have specific selection criteria and therefore have particular demands of A-levels.
- 5 Government advisors (**GA**) - Curriculum developer, QCDA, Ofqual, Tomlinson Review group member, and DCELLS. These were chosen in order to understand the relationship between A-levels and politics.
- 5 A-levels researchers (**R**) - the Nuffield Review, Cambridge Assessment, IBO, Ofqual standards researcher, and an awarding body. These were chosen in order to better understand the history of A-levels and issues such as standards.

All participants were of senior level, 12 were male and 8 were female. They were approached based on the role of their jobs, which were identified by me as significant to this study. The majority were British Caucasian, middle-class in appearance, and well-educated through the English system (several mentioned studying at Oxford or Cambridge). I discuss the significance of the sample later.

The sample did not include learners, their parents, or employers. I considered broadening participation. However, I decided that the scope of this study should focus on the views of those who work in the field of A-levels, are familiar with historical policy making in this area, and who therefore may understand reasons behind their continued existence better than an average person. In addition other surveys (e.g. the QCA survey and Nuffield Review survey) have already reviewed the broader public opinion of A-levels² especially teachers and parents. As already noted, in order to focus the study, employers were not included. However, in any of the full formal consultations on the future of A-levels, it would be remiss not to include all stakeholders including the general public.

² I review these studies in Chapter 4.

3.2.3 Methods for data collection

I have used a variety of data collection methods in this study, including document analysis, interviews and focus groups. However, as the focus of my thesis was on trying to understand the reasons behind the Labour government's decision to maintain the A-levels, talking to influential stakeholders was the best way to engage with the possible answers as well as to understand what their own views are on this topic. Therefore, interviews were the main data collection method for my study. As is the case with most research, the risks associated with the collection of data and its suitability to the research question is of great importance. All methods have some advantages and disadvantages specific to them. The following section explores them in more detail. Other methods (such as a questionnaire and policy analyses) were rejected as they were less well suited to answering my research question within the time and resources available. In addition, as previously mentioned, data from surveys also already exists and will be covered by my document analyses. The proposed methods were the most suitable in their 'fitness for purpose' to my research question (Hammersley, 2002). In addition, through the use of combined methods, the limitations and biases of the individual methods were reduced.

The following sections explore each of these areas in more detail.

Documents

The first stage of my research involved reviewing various documents as a data source. I wanted to understand what was already written about A-levels and to obtain as much information on the subject as possible. These included surveys conducted by QCA and the Nuffield Review on attitudes towards A-levels. In addition, various documents, such as the Tomlinson Report and the recent 14-19 White Paper, were reviewed, as well as other more generic literature on A-levels, to consider what evidence has already been established that could explain the reasons for maintaining A-levels. As this was pre-existing data not collected for my study's purpose, these documents were not used as the sole data. They were used only in collaboration with other data. In addition to providing contextual information on A-levels, I also used this data to generate topic questions for the focus groups. Furthermore, they were used to inform and exemplify the findings from the primary data (e.g. confidence in A-levels). Deciding what to use was a

difficult choice, especially since there were so many documents on A-levels. In the end, I decided to use only the latest data (2004 onwards) as I was primarily interested in the post-Tomlinson review context. In essence, document analysis was mainly used for the triangulation of data.

Focus group

Focus groups are usually conducted as a semi-structured interview in a group setting, with a focus on a specific topic. The aim of this focus group was to act as a pilot for my interviews. I designed my focus group as a group activity exercise workshop, where a main topic would be written on the flip chart (e.g. what were the advantages of A-levels) and participants were asked to stimulate interactive discussion. As they were all involved in the area of A-levels through their work, there was a common shared social context. They could hear each other's responses, make additional comments beyond their original replies, and no consensus was sought or needed. This provided some quality control of the data because participants

tend to provide checks and balances on each other which weed out false or extreme views. (Patton, 1987, p.135)

This discussion provided an excellent background to the study and informed me of initial common themes. As with other focus groups, the main benefits were the possibility of additional insights through the interaction of ideas and suggestions from group members and learning the language used in the A-levels programme. This was essential for creating an effective interview schedule (Robson, 2000). In addition, focus groups provide very resource and time efficient methods for data collection.

The danger with focus groups is that one participant may dominate the conversation at the expense of others. In order to prevent this, I made sure that less verbal participants had an opportunity to contribute. Another weakness of the focus group is that response time to any given question is increased and the number of questions limited. In the one hour of the workshop, the participants focused on three major topics (advantages and disadvantages of A-levels, why we have A-levels, and other options to A-levels). In order to optimise time, I asked a colleague to take notes, whilst I was acting as a facilitator. Finally, focus groups

can lead to conflict and power struggles or censoring each other (Patton, 1987). I did not encounter any of these problems as all my participants were treated as 'equal with no hierarchy' (Weiss, 1998). I was, however, unable to provide them with a confidentiality guarantee, as obviously it was a group activity. They were fully informed of the nature of the activity before it took place, and confidentiality outside the workshop with 'the outsiders' was still observed.

Interviews

The main advantage of the interview technique was that it provided rich data. I received detailed answers, which were particularly useful in order to fully grasp the reasons behind A-levels. I used interviews in order to provide

a framework within which participants can express their own understanding in their own terms. (Patton, 1987, p.115)

The nature and content of the interviews were informed by the document analysis and focus group. I conducted semi-structured interviews with only a few broad questions used. A digital recorder was used for all interviews undertaken. Nineteen out of twenty interviews were successfully recorded. One failed to record and had to be written up immediately following the interview. However, I shared this transcript with the respondent, and she confirmed that it was an accurate representation of the interview. The interviews were relatively informal, conducted at the interviewee's place of work. These were some highly influential people in a unique situation - half way between a formal position (so a little guarded) and an informal one (quotable). Interestingly, the interviewees were always prepared to talk about the question in great length, almost as if they had rehearsed (or used) the answer previously. An example of the length of the answer to a particular question is given in Appendix 2.

The main disadvantage of an interview is that it is very time and resource intensive, and it involves finding suitable times for the interviewees. Some interviews had to be postponed and dates changed, as understandably this activity was not a priority in respondents' busy schedules. It also required clarifying what was meant by 'off the record' remarks – was it 'off the record' for my study, or for the QCDA? I am not aware of any bias in the situation, although I did sometimes feel like some of the interviewees were treating me as a representative of QCDA, 'off-loading' their concerns onto me. I have tried to keep neutral and avoid

influencing the direction of the answers. Judging by the responses obtained, there does not appear to be any 'social desirability' effect (Robson, 2000) because responses seem well balanced. It is worth noting that I have conducted a great number of interviews through my job and academic work and therefore I have an experienced background in using this technique. Based on this experience I believe that the interviews were conducted in an entirely professional manner.

3.3 Validity and reliability

Validity is concerned with the extent to which the indicator captures the concept of interest. An indicator should measure what you intend to measure. Reliability is concerned with whether repeated efforts to measure the same phenomenon come up with the same answer (Weiss, 1998). Using a multi-method data collection approach, I tried to account for the different strengths and weaknesses of different methods of data collection and, thereby, to increase the rigour of my research. In addition, the use of different methods (triangulation) may have strengthened the validity and credibility of the findings, because it helped overcome the weakness of any single method (Rossi et al, 2000). I used both methodological (different approaches) and data (different data sources/people at different groups) triangulation (Denzin, 1978 in Patton, 1987). This helped corroborate information obtained from different sources, as a cross-check through different modes of inquiry (Weiss, 1998). In addition, the validity and reliability of data depend to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity, competence, rigour and training of the researcher (Patton, 1987). I believe that my experience as a researcher, and the process of doing this particular study, greatly assisted in ensuring the validity and reliability of the study.

It is hard to focus solely on ensuring the validity and reliability of the methodology when conducting qualitative research. I used the research methods that contributed most to answering the main questions about the A-level programme. I did not want only to explore the A-level programme as it currently is, but to also understand the specific reasons why it is the way it is and what might be the future for it. I was particularly interested in the views of those who are involved in the programme and work with A-levels on a daily basis –those who, in a sense, have an inside knowledge of it. Therefore, the validity of this study was also based on authenticity (fairness to everyone involved) and credibility (using interviewees who represent different groups). The multi-methods approach was used to ensure that

the full breadth of the topic was covered. All answers were treated as equal and all were used for the exploration of themes.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Whenever a new research study starts, one must review the ethical issues that may arise during the conducting of it. Ethical rules could be classified under four concerns (Newman and Brown, 1996):

- not informing participants of the nature of the research or involving them without their knowledge,
- exposing participants to physical stress or situations that would diminish their self-respect,
- invading participants' privacy, and
- withholding benefits.

In my study, I was very clear to my participants about the nature of the research, what it was for, and how I was going to report the findings. I am confident they were never under any stress. I emphasised that I was interested in their views, based on their experience of A-levels, and that I accepted that their views might be different to those of the organisations they represent. They were under no pressure to expose any views that could be classified as private, or in breach of their privacy. All findings would be shared with them as a way of contributing to the debate on exams and policy making. I was not aware of any other benefits that could be withheld from them as a result of this study.

Research is often more difficult when a study is being conducted within one's own organisation. Being an employee of the QCDA and part of the Research and Evaluation team provided me with good background knowledge of the A-level programme and access to the relevant documents. It also raised the issue of 'insider research'. It is difficult to conduct an independent study at the organisation where one works, because of perceptions of bias. This was resolved by acknowledging these issues in my research before the data interpretation, and by ensuring that I remained as objective as possible in its interpretation. In addition, using several sources of information reduced the bias. Another issue to consider was that of reciprocity. From the beginning I planned on providing a summary report to QCDA. I also needed to manage their expectations from this research, to

ensure they were realistic. Having access to information, people and documents, and having full support of my manager were privileges that I was aware of at all time. This meant that I knew the setting and background of the research very well and I knew what role everyone did. This enhanced credibility. However, it also meant that I felt a certain pressure not to 'let the side down'.

Whilst my research was not conducted within QCDA, I am aware that my access to my participants was greatly aided by being an employee of the organisation. In fact, the majority of participants were met through my QCDA work, or were recommended by contacts made during my work. There is a distinction between what is needed to formally gain access and what needs to happen to gain support and acceptance of those involved (Robson, 2000). My knowledge of QCDA and different stakeholders' work undoubtedly helped my research to be accepted as an independent and useful contribution to the programme. This encouraged participants to engage. However, there is an issue with the ethics of power and status. I, as a researcher, had power deriving from being in control of the data, which comes from different sources 'in the power system' (Patton, 1997, p.168). I had to ensure that all participants were aware that I was undertaking this study as a researcher and not as someone who in any way represented QCDA. The worry was that any potential 'power relationship' between the QCDA and for example, teachers, would lead to them feeling under pressure to take part or to provide certain answers. I have no evidence that this happened. I kept reminding myself that the participants had been informed that they did not have to participate or answer any question if they so chose.

The majority of the data collected was primary data, clearly for the purpose of this study, and as a result, no permission was required for its use. Therefore, the ownership of all data was clear from the start of the research. BERA (2004) guidelines clearly state that there is a responsibility to all participants even if they are just a part of the context. Their informed consent included information on what the project was about, what they were asked to do, protection of privacy (information gained from their answers was anonymised), that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. There was also the issue of ensuring that all the participants of the study were protected. The participants are used to giving their frank and honest answer when evaluating a programme, and could in no way be personally affected by the findings of the research. The participants have agreed to let me use the data obtained by giving

me 'explicit authorization' (Robson, 2001, p.34). It was also agreed that the participants are not party to any decisions about the research design (Oliver, 2003) in order to guarantee the objectivity of the study. Apart from the documents used for the background research, all other data were collected by me and as such I have copyright over it. The documents used for the background research were only those that are in public domain and available to any researcher.

Through being involved in the process of knowledge production, I accept that I had ethical responsibility for those for whom my findings are relevant (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002) either through direct impact (for example, users of this research) or those in the same field, working on similar issues. The complexity of the topic and the fact that A-levels are of a huge public interest meant that I was aware that any claims or interpretations I make may be scrutinised carefully by a wide range of readers, and that in England nearly everyone possesses strong opinions on this topic. Depending on timings, and the political climate, suggesting, for example, that A-levels should be abolished, or that the government has too much self-interest in them, could be extremely controversial. This is an area in which reflexivity as a researcher, with emphasis on my chosen epistemology (constructivist) and methodology (interviews) is an important part of ethical considerations. All the conclusions made in this study are only as valid as my interpretations of the data on which they are based. They can in no way be generalised to cover all different stakeholders' views.

Finally, I had to acknowledge that there is a certain self interest involved in choosing a study where results can be utilised. I was aware that the review of A-levels is due in 2013 and that my findings could potentially be taken on board through the QCDA. I had a stake of my own in this research - increasing my professional interest that could potentially lead to further professional development, and trying to reconcile both the QCDA as a sponsor of my doctoral course and the Institute of Education's requirement for independent research. This needs to be acknowledged. Doing favourable research could be used as a way of progressing in one's career and this could lead to the conflict of interest if there is a need for 'whistle blowing' as a result of the research (McNamee and Bridges, 2002). I tried to account for this by being a reflective practitioner (Weiss, 1998), basing my conclusions on data and not pre-judging the results. My own research credibility is important, and I would not influence or interpret the findings in any way to artificially create a favourable report. It is also worth noting that since

starting this research, I have stopped working for the QCDA because of its imminent closure. As such, there is a much reduced potential conflict of interest in relation to any possible benefits to be gained from the study's conclusions.

Chapter 4 – Data analysis process

In this chapter I present the data analysis process. I begin by describing the data management approach and coding framework in the first section, and then I present the data analysis. The final section of the chapter presents the next steps in the thesis.

4.1 Data management approach

Analysis refers to sorting, arranging and processing data in order to come up with a coherent account. Methods of analysis are handcrafted to help identify trends, themes and patterns (Weiss, 1998). The focus of my analysis was based on the research questions. In my case, the focus was on exploring the reasons and emerging themes about the A-level programme. The analyses of interviews and focus group responses and other text documents were based on a qualitative approach - involving the provisional positing of initial ideas developed during the data gathering process, followed by data analysis, leading to overarching themes.

My process of the analysis can be summarised as:

- Check completeness of the data
- Transcribe interviews, focus groups and document analysis
- Code all transcribed data using Atlas software (Atlas.ti, 2008)
- Classify codes according to their meaning and direction
- Organise data into categories by observing emerging patterns and recurrences
- Look for examples of negative cases that do not fit the pattern (alternative explanation)
- Identify themes based on the main categories.

Each sentence or paragraph was coded according to the meaning expressed in it. Each code was presented with some examples. The software used was assisting me in organising the data, but the actual analysis of it (extracting or assigning the meaning to sentences) was done by me as qualitative software is not designed to automate that process. I was determined to have full control over the data.

Therefore the majority of the analysis was done through a slow, hands-on approach, involving piles of paper and post-it notes, creating matrixes for myself

based on grouping data by questions and then by groups of respondents before deciding on themes.

Once coding was completed, all codes were then pulled together and categorised according to their relationships and patterns. In addition, each code was labelled according to a group whose views it represented. Once this was accomplished, and double checked, I assigned all categories to themes. I chose to analyse data in this way because it was the most convenient approach to deal with a great amount of information gathered and to summarise it in manageable chunks. Furthermore, it allowed me to observe emerging relationships between the concepts and also to anticipate that some themes may provide opposing views based on the group they came from.

4.1.1 Coding framework

The development of coding frameworks would normally start with a set of hypotheses or key questions, which the research is seeking to answer. There were four main areas I wanted to consider:

1. Stakeholders - Do opinions differ significantly amongst different stakeholder groups (schools, government advisors, HE, and researchers)?
2. Perception of A-levels - What are the advantages and disadvantages of A-level programme?
3. Reasons for A-levels – What themes are emerging on why we have A-levels in England?
4. Alternative Options – How do A-levels compare to other qualifications we currently have (namely the 14-19 Diplomas and IB)? What is the future for A-levels?

With these main areas of interest in mind, coded data were grouped into categories, although some key elements of categorisation overlapped significantly and were themselves part of a bigger picture. The initial attempts to build a coding tree based on these areas illustrated that the issues which affect one area were also of interest to the others. For example, the future of A-levels area could affect:

- Perception of A-levels
- Stakeholder areas (how the perceived futures of A-levels differ depending on who was providing an opinion)

This meant that certain data were multi coded so to be available in all relevant categories.

The strategy adopted was as follows:

- Develop a group label as an initial portal or entry based on the 'Stakeholder' area
- Provide a similar set of labels for each category 'Perception', 'Reasons', and 'Alternative option'
- Code all evidence initially to these top four categories
- A series of categories covering emerging issues from which at least one must be selected to code the extract
- A set of categories identifying important issues

Experience had shown me that one of the most difficult areas was to select an appropriate category, and not to simply link data to a stakeholder label, since that provides no additional information. Some areas are coded to more than one issue - for example, complaints about A-levels getting easier was coded as both disadvantage of A-levels (Perception node) and as a standards issue (Reasons node). In practice the approach is based on multi-coding each piece of evidence to several categories, which are then merged to three themes. The 'Stakeholder' category remains within each theme and indicates the proportion of evidence in each theme which is relevant to each group.

The final analysis proposed the following themes and categories:

- The 'Perception' theme is divided into two categories: Advantages and Disadvantages.
- The 'Reasons' theme consists of several categories that can be used to interpret A-levels' resistance to change and these were: 'Standards', 'Parity of esteem', and 'Fitness for purpose'.
- The 'Alternative options' theme is divided into two categories: 'Current possibilities' and 'Future'.

The next section exemplifies my data analysis.

4.2 Data analysis

Data analysis consists of three sections, each concerned with an individual data source (documents, focus group, and interviews). Data sources are presented in the order in which they were collected. Documents were reviewed, followed by a focus group of QCDA employees and these findings were used for the creation of the interview schedule. Interviews were conducted last.

As explained in the coding framework section, there were three main themes used to summarise my data analysis. The themes followed my research questions:

1. Perception - What are the advantages and disadvantages of A-level programme?
2. Reasons– What themes are emerging that could be used for explaining why we have A-levels in the country?
3. Alternative options – what are the alternatives to A-levels currently and for the future?

The following sections exemplify my data analyses in each data source.

4.2.1 Documents analysis

Documents were analysed as a specific data source. They were also used to provide background information. They provided an opportunity to identify the major issues and to decide on the areas for focusing the questions in each of the data collection methods. Through reading the documents several issues were identified, such as the idea that A-levels were not as challenging as before, what were the current revisions of A-levels, that there was a rise in popularity of alternative qualifications, and many others. Many of these issues were supported by my collected data and are used to inform the discussion of the themes in the following section.

Two major sources of data were used for documentary analysis. The first was Ofqual's survey called 'Annual survey on perceptions of A-levels and GCSEs' (Ofqual, 2009). This was conducted by Ipsos MORI, and researched the perceptions of A-levels and GCSEs among teachers, learners, parents and the general public. The second was the Nuffield Review Higher Education Focus

Groups Preliminary Report (NR, 2007) whose research was undertaken by members of the Nuffield 14-19 Review and UCAS Outreach department staff.

Analysis of the Ofqual survey focused on:

- the perceptions of the A-level examination system among the general public, parents, learners and teachers, in particular: perceptions of the A-level qualification
- confidence in the A-level examinations system, and
- information received on the A-level examination.

The survey found that all groups were still supportive of the A-level programme, and this support appears to continue through all the years the survey has run.

Analysis of the Nuffield Review report focused on the outcomes that HE staff seek from the 14-19 Education and Training system in terms of the types of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions they would ideally like to see being developed in new learners. Several major themes emerged from the report (e.g. choice and breadth within subjects; overemphasis on exam success; assessment burden) and these are discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

4.2.2 Focus group analysis

A focus group was held with eight QCDA employees who all work in the Qualifications and Skills development division. They are part of group that is involved in managing new or revised qualifications including A-levels.

Final data from the focus group was then assigned to the three themes:

- The advantages and disadvantages of A-levels
- Reasons for having A-levels
- Alternatives to A-levels.

The following are the codes in each of the category of the 'Advantages and Disadvantages' theme:

- The advantages of A-levels (widely accepted, specialised and focused, gateway to university, clear 'next steps', historically 'academic', and challenging).

- The disadvantages of A-levels (not as good as 'old' A-levels, too narrow, artificially improve results by retaking, perception that they are not all equal, too big a jump from GCSEs).

The following are the codes in each of the category of the 'Reasons for having A-levels' theme:

- Standards (political accountability, brand of 'gold standard', international recognition)
- Parity of esteem (enable social mobility, familiar academic route, promising future)
- Fitness for purpose (change too risky, knowledge vs. entrance test, HE support, familiar, no 'real' alternative)

The following are the codes in each of the categories of the 'Other alternative options to A-levels' theme:

- Current alternatives (The 14-19 Diplomas, IB, BTEC, OCR Nationals, NVQs, Apprenticeships, Work Experience)
- Future (Skills shortages and economic downturn may influence change, Linear vs. modular, Employment link, Politicised top-down education, Are they still A-levels?).

In addition, all participants were asked if they thought there would still be A-levels in 2050 (100 years after their creation). Six participants opted for the 'not likely' option and two for the 'possibly' option.

The group argued that the impact of any potential change to A-levels was likely to be big, since it would affect awarding bodies' systems and lead to the re-training of teachers and markers. It would demand a transition strategy and implementation and influence the league tables. However, in particular, it would challenge the stability of standards, which is of utmost importance to the regulation of exams.

The findings from the focus group have influenced the creation of the interview schedule. These findings, together with findings from other data sources, are discussed in detail in the following few chapters.

4.2.3 Interviews analysis

Twenty interviews were conducted during the data collection phase, with various stakeholders that were then grouped into four main groups: school representatives (S), HE representatives (HE), government advisors (GA) and A-level researchers (R). The full profile of the interviewees was provided in the sample section of this thesis. See Appendix 2 for an extract from the interview transcription.

Each interview lasted between thirty and seventy-five minutes, depending on the interviewee. The interviews were semi-structured (for interview schedule see Appendix 1), allowing the respondent to talk freely about the posed question. All interviews were then transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti software, following the coding framework described in the previous section of this thesis. The interviews were transcribed in full, without marking pauses, hesitations or interruptions unless they were deemed important for the analysis.

Examples of coding process for the three themes are presented next.

Theme 1 - Advantages vs. Disadvantages of A-levels

Tables 1a summarise the codes assigned to the data within the category of A-levels Advantages.

Table 1a: Advantages of A-levels codes

Code	Code description
1	well established, historical, what we know, familiar, has a standard, measure of attainment
2	HE support, entrance exams, diff backgrounds
3	Accessible
4	flexibility, pick and mix, learner choice
5	depth, specialisation
6	improved performance, predictable
7	3 year HE course
8	difficult, challenging, interesting
9	international brand

The following examples illustrate how some of the codes were decided on. Each of these categories is discussed in full in the following section.

- Coded as **1A (code 1, Advantage category)** is an interviewee's perception of how A-levels are well established, because we have had them for the last 50 years and we are all familiar with them. For example:

Another strength is that A-levels have a very good reputation, despite the fact everyone is knocking them all the time, they actually have a very strong reputation despite that, and they got a currency. They got that reputation through being in operation since 1950s, and they figure widely in qualification field since 1980s. (R)

- Coded as **4A (code 4, Advantage category)** is an interviewee's view of how the elective nature of A-levels is what makes them popular with learners. For example:

I think that A-levels do provide a choice for the learner because learners will choose to specialise in areas that interest them and areas in which they feel they have done well. And I think that choice

to elect their subjects is probably the rational for it in terms of learners. (S)

Tables 1b summarise the codes assigned to the data within the category of A-levels Disadvantages.

Table 1b: Disadvantages of A-levels codes

Code	Code description
10	AS vs. A2
11	narrow, specialise too early, drop maths, English, languages
12	improve performance by playing the system (Jan sittings, retakes, appeals)
13	all about results, teach to the system, too much media attention
14	unclear purpose (HE entrance, stand alone, real life preparation)
15	not kept up with the pace of change (better in the past)
16	prescriptive, predictable, boring, not stretching enough
17	other - no rank order, inclusion issue
18	too easy, grade inflation, unreliable marking

The following examples illustrate how some of the codes were decided on. Each of these categories is discussed in full in the following section.

- Coded as **11D (code 1, Disadvantage category)** is an interviewee's perception of how A-levels are too narrow, and lead to early specialisation. For example:

I think probably the issue that comes up time and time again with is that they are very narrow in their delivery i.e. they are only delivering 3 or 3 and a half subject areas. And that has always been the criticism, particularly for the learners who are intending to take A-levels, they are making a decision at the age of 15 or 16 which is probably too early to make a decision like that, and then you are very much slid into that area and it is very difficult. This narrowing of the curriculum has always been cited as one of the weaknesses of A-level programme. (HE)

- Coded as **14D (code 14, Disadvantage category)** is an interviewee's perception of the unclear and conflicting purpose of A-levels. For example:

In terms of HEs and league tables, A-levels have so many different audiences, for employers, for HE and for league tables, and some of these are conflicting requirements and consequently it is quite a struggle delivering an effective qualification, as we are busy trying to please all these different audiences. That is certainly one element that is negative in the current system. (GA)

Theme II - Reasons for A-levels

Table 2 summarises the categories and codes assigned to the data.

Table 2: Reasons for A-levels categories

Code	Category description
53	Standards (includes codes: politics, standards over time, standards across subjects, importance of standards, international comparability, gold standard)
54	Parity of esteem (includes codes: academic and vocational divide, A-levels link to universities, professional future, segregation of learners)
55	Fitness for purpose (includes codes: HE selection criteria, HE preparation, certificate of secondary education, school leaving age, lack of overall schooling acknowledgement)

The following examples illustrate how some of the codes were decided on. Each of these categories is discussed in full in the following section.

➤ Coded as **53R (code 53, Reasons category)** is an interviewee's perception that A-levels are important because of the standards' issue. For example:

I mean some universities have been winging now for at least 15-20 years about erosion of standards in A-level, and how we have more students getting As now. I'd like to know what proportion of kids are now get 1st class honours, and if it is higher (and I suspect it is) then 20 years ago, does that mean that their standards have been eroded too? And how can these kids, who they claim are not as good as kids 20 years ago because they don't know as much, be doing better at universities? There are only two possible explanations – either standards in A-levels are as good as they were and kids are as prepared as they were, or their teaching has become so bloody brilliant that their teaching technique is making up for the deficiency of skills and knowledge. (S)

➤ Coded as **54R (code 54, Reasons category)** is an interviewee's perception of how A-levels are driven by HE's need for a discriminatory test, which they can use to select learners. For example:

I don't think people have really got an appetite to take on the university establishments in terms of the way they manage admissions. I think a lot of the reforms so far have followed slavishly and uncritically the demands of leading universities – I mean the whole A thing is just there so that leading universities can have a better discriminator and there is no curriculum justification for more differentiation in A-level outcomes. (S)*

➤ Coded as **55R (code 55, Reasons category)** is an interviewee's view that The purpose of A-levels has become unclear and that this is an issue that needs clarifying. For example:

And A-levels are much higher standard than anything else. I mean that is an issue in itself. If you want to have education for all, now we want as big a percentage of population as possible to achieve level 3, you've got to make sure it's achievable. (GA)

Theme III - Alternatives to A-levels

Table 3 summarises the codes assigned to the data.

Table 3: Alternative options codes

Code	Code description
23	Current possibilities – the 14-19 Diplomas
24	Current possibilities – IB
25	Current possibilities - Bac (AQA, 6th Form)
26	Future - future unchanged, high stake, risky
27	Future – unified curriculum diploma

The following examples illustrate how some of the codes were decided on. Each of these alternative qualifications is discussed in full in the following section.

➤ Coded as **23AO (code 23, Alternative options category)** is an interviewee's perception of how the 14-19 Diplomas uncertain future and low uptake may be an issue. For example:

On the negatives, this is really a management issue but what really blocks me on the 14-19 Diplomas is that we like BTEC, and we know how they work... The market is there and the product for the market exists. And it is still not clear to me whether the 14-19 Diplomas are taking over BTECs; and if they are not – they may fail because I don't think there is enough space in the market for both. And in the likely period of a very tight public expenditure in the next 5 years or so, you are not going to get Colleges to take a gamble on putting Diplomas on, that won't recruit because BTEC is going to continue to recruit, and they cannot afford to do loss leaders. Why should we drop what works for untried, untested Diplomas with an uncertain future, not sure what the currency is in terms of HE acceptance, uncertain funding. (S)

- Coded as **24AO (code 24, Alternative options category)** is an interviewee's perception of IB being for the elite, and/or unable to cope with all types of learners. For example:

I think IB carries a degree of kudos though, so it means even more, perhaps IB is now what A-levels were 20 years ago! A-levels used to be elite, now it's IB, and elitism prevails at Universities. I had people say it is good because it brings you people who are able to think for themselves, who are able to think laterally and problem-solve. I am not sure whether IB does that or whether it is the sort of people who do it, I don't know enough about it. (GA)

- Coded as **26AO (code 26, Alternative options category)** is an interviewee's perception of how A-levels are unlikely to change, because they are high stake and used for selection, and as such will continue. For example:

But I suppose in other countries it depends what hurdles are, I don't know, in some countries assessments aren't as crucial as in this one. The problem is this country is that our 16-19 qualifications, so much is placed on them, that a difference in grade means you get to Oxbridge or not. There are so high stakes, so all of the assessments have to be absolutely robust and so there is nothing in the mix that can be just ok, everything has to be very thoroughly assessed. So this is what makes us different from other countries where you might just need to get your leaving certificate and people say 'well, you tried really hard' and you get sorted out later... (R)

4.2 Next steps

After completing my analyses by data sources, I needed to find the way to best discuss the findings in detail. I have therefore decided to discuss each of the themes in a format that follows from my research questions. Each of the following

chapters focuses on a specific research question and they are all drawn together in the conclusion. The research questions were:

- What did influential stakeholders think are the advantages and disadvantages of A-levels? This research question and my research findings that relate to it are discussed in chapter 5.
- What makes A-levels so resistant to change? This research question and my research findings that relate to it are discussed in chapter 6.
- Did they think A-levels should be replaced with another qualification? If so, what options are possible? This research question and my research findings that relate to it are discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 5 - Advantages and disadvantages of A-levels

Chapter 5 is divided into two parts - the advantages of A-levels and the disadvantages of A-levels. Each part presents my respondents' views on this issue and how they compare with other research findings in this area. I complete this chapter by my concluding thoughts section.

5.1 Advantages of A-levels

My study found that A-levels have several advantages and the main three can be summarised as:

1. their familiarity and 'brand',
2. their structure (being accessible, the capacity for the individual to improve performance, allow specialisation, have flexibility of choice, are challenging and interesting), and
3. their function in accessing higher education (as a selection tool and by providing a foundation of specialised knowledge).

5.1.1 Familiarity and 'brand'

A-levels are well understood and accepted, mainly as a result of having been around for a long time. There were no noticeable differences in comments between different groups of respondents. Responses mainly focused on the fact that A-levels have been around since the 1950s and that most of the influential stakeholders from the UK have been through the system themselves and are familiar with it. They also commented on the simplicity of structure. Learners choose three or four subjects they are interested in, they study it for two years, get an overall grade that is a reflection of their knowledge of that subject and the general ability to study at an advanced level. Because of its longevity and because it is the main academic qualification for post-16 learners, it is well understood by teachers, learners, parents and higher education institutions. Several responses mentioned that A-levels have a known standard. For example:

Of course, we have been using A-levels results for many years, so there is tradition that comes with it, and the argument is that with A-levels you have this standard that is meant to mean something, so we are happy to keep it. (S)

That was one good thing about the A-level, it is meant to be an A-level no matter where you take it and therefore you knew where you were with it. (GA)

This emphasis on A-level's history and tradition was also noted in an international context. Some representatives were very proud of the reputation of A-levels overseas. For example:

Well, they obviously have a certain international branding. They are a big business for the awarding bodies and the government was clever enough to market them through the British Council. People know where they stand with A-levels. (S)

... they are very British and if you are looking at the British education overseas, A-levels offer clout. (GA)

The importance of the A-level's history has also been noted by others. It is possibly the case that because they have been around for 50 years, people have a fondness for them, which has been sustained by the gold standard label. As Newton (2007) suggests:

Partly due to its longevity, but perhaps mainly due to its exclusivity, it became known as the Gold Standard. (p.15)

Boston (2008) agrees:

The A-Level is spoken of as the gold standard, by some with nostalgia. (p.2)

Media suggests that it is the very tradition of A-levels, the familiarity of them for the public and teaching profession, and the fact that most decision makers have taken them themselves, that makes A-levels resistant to change (The Independent, 1997). For a long time, A-levels have been regarded as the 'gold standard' and as such, politicians have avoided the temptation to tamper with them. The right wing think tank Reform suggest that the reason the Labour government avoided restructuring of the system following Tomlinson's review in 2004, was the fear that that move would erode in the public eye the supposed 'gold standard' of the A-level (Stephen, 2007) and the desire to preserve their higher status (Haldenby et al, 2008). As mentioned in the literature review, other authors such as Hodgson and Spours (2003) agree that this perception of 'gold standard' is an important factor contributing to A-levels resistance to change.

The A-level brand is therefore one of the advantages that I expected to find in my research. There was an agreement across the board that A-levels are well understood, mostly respected here and abroad, and culturally very 'British'. Every interviewee also mentioned them being thought of as the 'gold standard'. However, when probed about where this expression comes from, not a single interviewee could point out the source and reference of it – although a few mentioned that 'it must have been some politician' or 'Conservatives' and in particular 'Thatcher'. My own research was unable to pinpoint the exact reference for calling A-levels 'the gold standard'. I find it very interesting that this expression, so familiar to many, and, more importantly, one often used to explain why England has A-levels, has no obvious source.

5.1.2 A-levels structure

A-levels are a modular qualification, meaning learners are taught and examined in smaller parts, immediately after having studied the relevant module (usually in January or Summer). Following on from the latest reforms, this means each A-level subject consists of two AS units (studied during the first year) and two A2 units (studied in the second year). Learners usually have a choice of which subjects to study, and most will start with four subjects during the first year. They may drop the weakest one when continuing to their second year, finishing with full A-levels in three subjects. Once they have passed the modules in the first year, they can either 'cash in' their units for the award of an AS level (which is both a free-standing qualification and the first half of A-level), or study for another two (A2) units and then cash all of them in their second year. They can usually re-sit modules at the following examination session.

My study found that all respondents accepted that flexibility of choice played to the strengths of the learners and was one of the main advantages of A-levels. It allowed the learner to study the subjects they are most adept at, truly interested in, or the ones they were planning to continue studying at university. They also liked the depth and specialisation that studying a subject over two years in several parts can provide, agreeing that this is usually an intense study at a sophisticated level and a good preparation for university. The downside of this choice is that certain subjects may be avoided by many learners. As one of my respondents says

Because the elective nature of it and the fact that you take 4 but really you want to take 3, means that you can have a very narrow curriculum and that you can avoid very important subjects such as maths, English, sciences and modern languages. So you can avoid the subjects that the society actually needs. And I think that culture of avoidance is still there. I find it in my own children, even though they are bright and capable, and yet none of my children so far have shown inclination towards sciences. And they don't have to in this country, they can look forward to disengagement with these subjects, and I think that is a problem, I think it produces psychological problems in relation to learning, and I think it does inevitable produces narrowness and there lies historical weakness of A-levels.(R)

The Nuffield Review (2008) agrees that the elective nature of general education is perceived to be a strength, as it enables learners to exercise choice and pursue what they enjoy rather than to continue with things they dislike. However, in order to avoid the negative side of choice (such as the tendency to drop demanding subjects), there is a need for a system that would balance choice and compulsion (such as the 14-19 English Bac Framework). In addition, even though choice is theoretically available, in reality it will depend on several factors. Apart from the obvious dependence on their GCSEs results, Higham and Yeomans (2007) suggest that the 'actual choice' is also restricted by factors such as: the school provision, learners' aspirations, and responses of influential stakeholders (e.g. universities) to the available choices. Fletcher and Perry (2008) have reported that the pattern of provision and type of institution makes a difference to learners. Foskett et al (2008) also found that several aspects of the institutional context (for example school ethos or SES) appear to be of particular importance in the choice process. Therefore, it is questionable how 'elective' the system is in reality.

One issue that revealed the most disagreement was the modularity of A-levels, and specifically the ability to re-take exams. I illustrate this issue below.

The modularity of A-levels and the ability to re-take modules were noted as advantages by many respondents, especially school representatives. Some examples are:

I introduced modular A-levels 20 years ago, when I was first Head of Chemistry, and saw immediate improvement in learners' achievement. Especially when teaching boys, they have a short term target, they can get feedback on their performance, learn from their mistakes, and they improved! And that's what education is about.

And again it is a function of the culture of education that we live in, you want to reduce any risks, and you take more risks with results with IB – people fail with IB! They used to fail with A-level, and they still do with AS level, but no one fails with the A-level anymore. You can retake the module now. But then again the absurdity in our culture in worrying about this, I mean what are we saying, that someone who had to retake their driving test is a worse driver as a result of it?

However, it was noticeable that HE respondents did not like this characteristic of A-levels. In fact, many thought that this was a disadvantage of A-levels. In particular:

Finally, I don't like the modular structure of them. It is a system that allows re-taking and perhaps that is an educational point to allow learners to improve, but from an HE point of view, it makes it harder to trust the grade. How do you know how many modules the learner retook? How reliable is the final grade? Now we can ask for this information, and we can get the UMS mark too, but we shouldn't have to, this should not be an issue at all.

There is no doubt that some schools take advantage of A-levels modularisation and retake rules, as one school representative freely admits:

And AS with A2, offers tremendous amount of flexibility if you take advantage of modularity, ... We take advantage of every opportunity, although it is restricted so it's not a free for all, we really target certain groups. ... The idea is to target the weakest AS module is January, because that's where there is the greatest scope for improvement, and then, target another one in the summer in the Year 13 and all of the rest A2 modules. I mean it has produced stunning results and we moved up league tables quite dramatically – quite frightening really (laugh) given that we don't have a particularly selective policy.

Literature shows that opinions on modularisation and the ability to retake modules are divided. Right-wing think tanks in particular have criticised this issue. For example, Bassett et al (2009), De Waal (2009) and the Sykes Review (2010) suggest that modularisation makes it difficult for A-level grades to be used as a true reflection of a learners' ability, because they may be using the rules in a 'tactical' way by retaking 'easier' AS levels to increase an overall grade. Mansell (2007) argues that the rise of modular exams leads to over-assessment, compartmentalised learning, a lack of incremental learning, a poorly developed overview of subjects and an inability to connect discrete areas of knowledge. On

the other hand, Hodgson and Spours (2003) write that the creation of the AS, combined with a modular approach to study and assessment and the opportunity to retake modules to improve personal performance, is widely favoured by teachers and learners. They suggest that the consistency of learner support for modularity, together with the opportunity to check progress and maximise performance, are real strengths and should be retained.

In the end, it may come down to the issue of trust. If universities do not trust A-level results, they are less likely to accept them as a true reflection of a learner's ability. However, arguably one of the goals of education is for learners to learn. As long as they are doing that, should it matter whether or not they managed to prove this knowledge at the first attempt or after several tries? The opinion of my respondents was split on this issue. Some suggested that HEIs should be looking for the basic foundation of certain knowledge and as long as it is there, it is irrelevant how one came to achieve it. Others suggested that what matters is an ability to study, and achieve, at an advanced level, and there is a need for results that reflect this ability. If, however, the objection is purely to the fact that the system is fallible, then perhaps that can be accounted for by the use of unit marks to prevent 'playing the system'. It can also be argued that the ability to 'play the system' (or rather make the most of the opportunity) may be the skill that will come in useful to these learners in years to come.

5.1.3 Higher education (HE)

A-levels were originally designed as a preparation for university. Accordingly, universities had a great deal of influence on the content of A-levels through their links with awarding bodies and through specified admissions criteria. Most undergraduate degree courses at English universities are both highly specialised and short, mainly lasting three years. A strong prior knowledge is an important prerequisite for many courses, particularly in the sciences, mathematics and languages (Sykes Review, 2010). Hence universities have a vested interest in the content of the A-level curriculum. Schools are expected to produce learners with good A-level grades and, therefore, increase their likelihood of progressing to a 'good' university.

Increased university participation and tighter regulation have led to competition amongst universities for the best students and a new tariff was developed for

university admissions. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service has established a points system (the UCAS Tariff) to report achievement for entry to university in a quantitative format. In particular, it enables comparisons between applicants with different types and volumes of achievement (Newton, 2007). The tariff covers all types of qualifications, with the aim of establishing parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. The idea was to encourage the take up of a range of qualifications, which in turn would promote and recognise breadth and volume of study. But selective universities, in particular, still have the power to select based on their own admissions criteria (Hodgson and Spours, 2003).

The admissions procedure perpetuates arguments about inequality. To discriminate in favour of one person necessitates discrimination against another. Stringer (2008) argues that if one discriminates between applicants purely on academic grades, one may indirectly discriminate on grounds of socioeconomic status too. Poorer learners may go to worse schools, and fail to get the qualifications needed for higher education. Although the private schools enrol only about eight per cent of learners, they produce a far higher proportion of A-level learners, especially those who obtain good A-level grades in traditional academic subjects (Wolf, 2004). Furthermore, some leading universities are offering fewer of their places to home students, and more places than has been traditional to overseas students. One of the reasons suggested for this is that the overseas students are more financially sustainable for universities (Stephen, 2007).

All participants of my study reported that the role A-levels play for HE is an advantage. It was generally accepted that A-levels are the main route to university, and that overall they tend to be a good preparation for it. The depth of the subject studied at A-levels was considered by many to be similar to university level, as exemplified by the following:

They are difficult. And for a long time I used to say to learners, and still do, that doing 3 A-levels in 2 years was more intense mode of study than doing a three year degree course. I did a history degree at Oxford, which was particularly intense because Oxford did 8 week term instead of 12 weeks, and I worked very hard, but I am not sure if in terms of time consumption it was necessarily much harder work than I put into 3 A-levels. (S)

The most commonly expressed sentiment about A-levels was that they are such a good preparation for university that they might be a reason why undergraduate degrees in England are only three years long. Most accepted this as a positive thing (the declining standards issue notwithstanding as I discuss in the next section). Some comments are presented below:

The other advantage, if you are looking from state's point of view, it seems to me that since we have highly specialised post-16 programme it means that we can keep 3 year degree courses. It is different to other countries and I don't think it features sufficiently in the debate about A-levels or broadening the curriculum. Somehow we look envious of the IB model or continental model but a lot of people look at that and they don't realise that the price you pay for breadth is lack of depth, and the price you pay for lack of depth is a 4 year degree. Which is why a Scottish university will take English students into their second year... And it seems to me that this is clearly an advantage. (S)

The depth of the qualification is one of the reasons why we have 3 year degree courses and that's certainly part of the reasons, and why this government has persistently resisted going back to more a generalist diploma because they were worried that they would then have to agree to 4 year degree courses. It is not quite as simple as that, because some of the courses already are 4 years long, and at the same time a reason why some universities in other countries have 4 years study is because they tend to give a broader course of study at the first year. But here people do go on to read English or mathematics, and that is what they do. They don't do English with minor subject. So the university courses here are much more specialised than in other countries. (GA)

The findings about A-levels and their link to HE are in line with my literature review. Most degrees are three years long and rely on A-levels to provide strong prior knowledge. The A-level is primarily seen as a university entrance exam. 76 per cent of learners who take A-levels go on to university. It is undoubtedly good to be able to study in some depth the subjects that you plan to continue studying at university, because it may provide not only a foundation for future learning but also a preparation for a different kind of learning.

However, Wilde and Wright (2007) have examined the views of staff at higher education institutions on how well 14–19 education and training prepares young people for higher education study. This suggests that there is a mismatch between the forms of teaching and learning in 14–19 and the requirements at HE. They also suggest that there is no firm evidence in how well A-level grades predict how

a learner will achieve at university. In addition, some learners take A-levels without necessarily planning to go to university. For them, A-levels are a record of their post-16 achievement and a qualification to be taken to their first job. There is no reason why only those who plan to continue going to university should study at an advanced level, or indeed why they should restrict their studying to a small handful of subjects.

I would argue that if A-levels are to remain a specialised, in-depth study of a few subjects that one is planning to continue to study further, then they are a perfect tool that needs little changing apart from ensuring they remain as rigorous as ever. However, if learners are to be encouraged to stay at school until they are 18, regardless of whether or not they would like to go on to university, then a more broad, diploma-style education, with continued studying of mathematics and English, and possibly including a practical element, may be more appropriate. As Hodgson and Spours (2003) suggest, a Baccalaureate-style award may be more intellectually satisfying and would encourage participation, progression and breadth of study, with skill building and reflection.

5.2 Disadvantages of A-levels

The participants in this study were also asked to identify what they consider to be the main disadvantages of A-levels. There were several areas that came up in the analysis, but they can be summarised as:

1. structural issues (their narrowness, early specialisation, lack of key skills, predictability),
2. the focus on results (leading to teaching to the test and strong media attention), and
3. the issue of A-level rigour.

In addition, some respondents felt that a couple of A-level's advantages are also their disadvantages, such as the ability to re-take modules and the unclear purpose of A-levels, i.e. as a standalone qualification or as a university entrance test.

5.2.1 Structural issues

The narrowness of the curriculum, often at the expense of important subjects such as mathematics, English and foreign languages, was the most commonly raised

criticism of A-levels. Many respondents commented on the fact that England is perhaps the only developed country in the rest of the world where learners are not compelled to study their own language and mathematics up to the age of 18. In addition, several respondents commented that the uptake of foreign languages is very small. This narrowness of curriculum is the result of the fact that learners specialise at 16 years of age. Some argue that it may be too early to decide which three subjects you want to continue to study at that age, especially since this choice may have a huge impact on the availability of options at university, and consequently your life. Most accept that you cannot have one without another, and that a narrow curriculum and early specialisation are the yang of the yin – depth of subjects and choice available to learners with A-levels. Some examples are:

Narrowness, well, it really is just a flipside of the coin. Hopefully, people who are clever keep learning and they stay whole in their intellectual and moral development anyway, but if you want a caricature – a doctor, who is wholly qualified in science and all the rest of it, but has personally bothered to read Dostoyevsky or Shakespeare is probably a better doctor as a result of it. Equally, someone well versed in English literature may need to spend all afternoon doing the spreadsheets and working out percentages for their department because if they couldn't do it they will have less confidence as a manager or a leader. That is an obvious disadvantage. (S)

Yes, the opposite really. People do not end up with as broad an education as they perhaps should. And I guess from the point of view of the DCSF, and particularly DIUS looking to see what skills the nation needs, and languages for instance, if there are shortages there and we need them, perhaps we should then introduce them as compulsory. And again with science and maths, if there is shortage of these skills, then the only way around it is by making it compulsory. But I think you would lose almost as much as you would gain, in that you would have a higher dropout rate, people wouldn't study subjects they enjoy studying, so you would lose in all that. And the subjects would be more superficial, because you cannot study them in as great depth, as you can when there are only 3 of them. (R)

Literature shows that the narrow focus and early specialisation of A-levels are perceived as a disadvantage, from Kingdon (1991) and the IPPR (1993) to more recently Fisher (2007) and the Nuffield Review (2008). Based on Dearing's (1996) recommendations, the AS was designed to broaden the curriculum and increase participation rates by providing both a stand-alone qualification at the end of the first year of study and to be a stage towards the full A-level. Hodgson and Spours (2003) have found that the role of AS in promoting a broader curriculum has only

been partially realised. The real impact of AS is the role it has played in giving learners greater subject choice and flexibility. However, whilst the broadening of the curriculum was largely confined to the taking of one extra subject in the first year of study, this still enables learners to delay early specialization and keep their options of university course or career open for longer.

I do not doubt that a broader curriculum would be of benefit to many, especially the learners. In a purely educational view, providing learners with a good foundation in several subjects, including mathematics and English, can only be a good thing. The majority of my respondents accepted that a Baccalaureate style education would be beneficial. However, the general feeling was that this would not only be a big and expensive overhaul of the English post-16 system. It would also take away learners' ability to choose the subject they would like to specialise in. It is also possible that expecting learners to study subjects that consist the Baccalaureate diploma would impact the numbers of learners studying at an advanced level - since the ability to choose which A-levels to specialise in was cited by my respondents as one of their strengths, albeit fraught with issues.

5.2.2 The focus on results

As previously noted, A-level results are used for different purposes. They are used as a selection tool for universities, as an end of secondary education certificate, for employment recruitment and as accountability data. It is unlikely that they can fulfil so many roles successfully. However, it does make it easier to understand why there is so much focus on results and why the English media is always interested in writing about them. Because schools' future is linked to 'good results', they have vested interests in producing learners who will be successful in their A-levels. Arguably, this may put a lot of pressure on schools (as well as learners), leading to suggestions that everything is too focused on getting the results at the expense of a wider education. Some of the opinions of the respondents of my study were:

... which made the courses very boring and teachers start teaching to the tests. So rather than doing things that are intrinsically interesting, teachers have fallen in the trap of saying you must do this or you will not pass your exams. They are desperately looking for ways to motivate students and that is the way it is. Their performance is reviewed on it, exams are now high stake so measurement is very important. It takes a very brave teacher not to teach to the test. (GA)

Good schools will kind of force kids to do other things, but schools and colleges who are concerned about where they are going to sit on the achievement and attainments targets and on the league tables, will just concentrate on getting the kids through their qualifications. (R)

Mansell (2007) writes that exams promote an instrumental view of learning, since learners pick up on the notion that only what is in the exam is valued and education is nothing more than preparation for the exam.

Education therefore becomes seen in terms of its utility to students in helping them clear the next hurdle, rather than of value in its own right. (p.147)

He further suggests that exams are only snapshots of learners' performance, not objective measure of everything they know. Furthermore,

the exams themselves facilitate and accentuate teaching to the test, which is rife, allowing pupils to be drilled in the precise requirements of the next assessment, rather than deepening and broadening their education. Mechanistic, reductionist, exam-driven teaching is the order of the day, ... Schools are concentrating most of their efforts on those pupils who are of most worth to them, statistically. And examiners are selling advice on how to do well, including cynical tricks to earn cheap marks... (p.245)

However, it is questionable how much 'teaching to the test' is going on in schools in England. Teachers may be focusing on the guidance and samples that awarding bodies provide with syllabuses. One could argue that this is what they should do and it does not imply that teaching to the test is taking place. I do not doubt that many other skills (such as the ability to conduct independent research, and develop and articulate a well thought out argument) are just as important, but these may be insufficient, if the basic knowledge is not there. It is impossible to know for certain how much is actually taught in the class and how much of what is taught ends up being tested. Therefore, it may never be possible to demonstrate that they are only taught what is necessary for the test. Moreover, even if the process were capable of testing every element of the curriculum established for the course of study, this would only strengthen the argument that it was 'teaching to the test'. Therefore this line of argument may be somewhat spurious. Perhaps the real issue is that there is a clear and consistent reflection between the course of study and the content of the examinations.

I particularly liked a comment from one GA that said:

This society is very interested in education, which is a good thing. It does have a very peculiar view of winners and losers. I think for A-levels, at least the newspapers believe that unless large number of people don't do particularly well at A-levels there is some failure in the system – which is absolutely crazy as far as I am concerned. But that is very clear. If you think about it, any student that is put on an A-level programme should pass, because there are plenty of students who are not allowed to go onto A-level programmes, so you shouldn't be entered if you can't at least get a D, and I think many schools and colleges are wary of entering students on A-level courses who they think will not get a D. So the pass rate should be very high, it's a self-selecting qualification.

This focus on results is best illustrated by the regular debate on standards. This I briefly mention below and review more fully in the next chapter.

5.2.3 A-level rigour

One of the most common criticisms of A-levels is that they are not 'what they used to be'. By this, it is usually meant that they are easier than they were in the past. This is evidenced by more learners getting good grades, and by anecdotal stories of today's learners being of poorer quality than learners of the past. The critics also often refer to the fact that they believe that marking is unreliable or that A-levels are a poorer relation to the IB. My study found similar opinions, and there were some interesting differences between different groups. HE respondents were mostly concerned with the declining standards, such as this one:

I would say grade inflation is our biggest concern. This is a massive problem, particularly in mathematics, this meant that we now have 43.7 per cent of students getting A grades, and yet we are finding the standard intake is actually lower than it was although we are asking for 3 As. And they are certainly not at the standard we would expect them to be. And the only reason for that is because the exam is easier than it was. Regardless of what everyone says, that's got to be the answer. I mean you can't blame the kids for that, it's the system! And this is particularly a problem in maths, I think there is a real issue there. So you keep having to up your entry requirements and find other ways to get your best students, whereas you used to be able to very much rely on A-levels for your entry, I mean that is why many are now going down the entrance exams route because the UK qualification is no longer up to the job.

School representatives, on the other hand, tended to talk more about the 'old A-levels programme' when education was 'broader'. For example:

Well as I said I think there was a time when A-levels were good, there was a real education going on. I am thinking in particular of grammar schools. So a lot of the mistakes were caused by thinking that education needs to be seen to be directly relevant. I know education ought to be relevant, but there is more than subject matter to education. Education is also about instilling and creating in youngsters the belief that they can achieve whatever it is that is put in front of them. And that is part of what school is about. So if IB is demanding and challenging, and A-levels are based on an education philosophy related to the economy of this country, I would think IB is a better programme to be in.

It would be too simple (and probably inaccurate) to conclude that HE respondents worry more about standards, whereas schools worry more about the quality of education. Apart from the obvious restriction that only a handful of each group took part in this study, there is also the issue of respondents focusing on those things that are of particular importance to them. HE respondents all worked as admission tutors and therefore choosing the 'best students' and how these students compared to previous years was of a particular interest to them. School representatives may feel constrained by the current system that focuses on results at expense of the broader education and therefore their thoughts were occupied with this issue. What was interesting though is that all groups thought that the nature of exams has changed – in terms of expectations and predictability and in terms of reliability of marking. For example:

And it is not immediately clear why the change has happened. It's to do with zeitgeist, there is a different attitude around. We have much higher expectations of the reliability of our exams and low expectations of validity. We really do demand reproducibility in a way which is unreasonable. (GA)

This belief that the system is imperfect is supported by Ofqual's own research. Their report into the public perception of reliability in examinations, based on a two year research study involving workshops that were held with parents, learners, employers, examiners, teachers and the general public, concluded that there is an acceptance of human error that occurs in the examination system (Ofqual, 2009). However, despite this acceptance, in 2002 when the issue of markers 'manipulating' grades was raised, public and media demanded the resignations of those involved and a radical overhaul of the whole examinations system (Hodgson

and Spours, 2003). It seems that this is one of the Catch-22 situations. We accept that the system is imperfect, but that does not stop us being disappointed when this imperfection is stated.

Whether A-levels today are easier than they were in the past is a question of comparability of standards that I discuss fully in the next chapter. What I find interesting is this need for them to be difficult – emphasising their function as a hurdle that will enable universities to filter learners not suitable for higher education. It again seems to disadvantage those 16 year-olds who are interested in continuing studying subjects of their choosing without necessarily planning to go to university. Surely the focus should be on the skills and knowledge development rather than on how many learners can pass the test and achieve a high grade?

5.3 Concluding thoughts on the *Advantages and disadvantages of A-levels*

Having worked in the area of A-levels for the past ten years, I was very familiar with the love – hate relationship people have with them. I have had countless discussions where a person from the educational profession would complain about A-levels (usually their declining standards or the narrowness of the programme) only to start defending them rigorously as soon as they think they are being attacked by someone from outside (i.e. someone who did not do A-levels herself). The findings from my study were not surprising – the love of their ‘currency’, the way they are (especially as a preparation for university); and the dislike of the way they are, what they are used for, and their inevitable failure to compete with the glories of the past.

What was surprising to me is that despite their disadvantages, there was very little appetite shown about wanting to replace them with something else. All of the disadvantages were in a sense deemed fixable. They could be supplemented with additional core subjects. Their purpose could be made clearer and they could be made as good as they were. It does not seem that A-levels are unsalvageable. When I first started conducting my research, I thought I would encounter a lot of opposition to A-levels. It is certainly what recent media reports made me believe. However, talking to my respondents, and engaging with other research on this topic, I have found insufficient support for abandoning the system. My next chapter focuses on three areas that make A-levels problematic, yet difficult to change: standards, the academic and vocational divide and their fitness for purpose.

Chapter 6 – A-levels and their resistance to change

Chapter 6 consists of three parts, based on the three major themes that arose from my analysis:

1. Comparability of standards,
2. Parity of esteem, and
3. Fitness for purpose.

These three parts are the main findings from my study about what makes A-levels resistant to change. I complete each part by my concluding thoughts section.

After discussing the advantages and disadvantages of A-levels, there were three clear themes that emerged from my research concerning A-levels' resistance to change. These themes summarise my respondents' views on why we still have A-levels and the reasons why several attempts to reform them as a programme of study have been unsuccessful. The themes are:

- Comparability of standards - because A-levels have existed for so long, we have standards for them which enables us to keep monitoring comparability;
- Parity of esteem – A-levels are an academic qualification that cannot be easily replaced with a qualification that achieves parity of esteem between academic and vocational education; and as an academic qualification A-levels are perfectly adequate; and
- Fitness for purpose - A-levels are used for several purposes that may not always be complimentary to each other. It would be difficult to change them fundamentally before their purpose is clarified, and if it did, it may transpire that they remain very fitting to some of their current purposes (e.g. as an university entrance exam).

The following chapters focus on discussing these three themes. Woven throughout these three reasons are two important characteristics previously discussed, namely the English psyche (with its fondness for the A-level brand that has national and cultural significance) and politics (the decision on A-levels being in the hands of the government).

6.1 Comparability of standards

This part of the chapter focuses on comparability of standards and the views of my participants. It begins by defining comparability and standards. The second part focuses on my findings in terms of comparability over time and comparability across subjects. It ends with my concluding thoughts on this topic.

6.1.1 Defining comparability and standards

It has become something of a tradition every August, when A-level results are published, for the media to passionately write about declining standards, 'dumbing down' of exams, and a failure of England's education – a debate sometimes known as 'the English disease' (Newton, 2007). Whilst comparability is primarily seen as an enduring fixation of educational discourse in England, it also exists internationally. However, it is not necessarily understood, manifested, or responded to in similar ways, and does not always assume the same social or political significance (Wolf, 2002). Newton (2007) suggests that the reasons for monitoring the comparability of examination standards are:

- It is a major topic of national debate, with huge media interest, and therefore of major political significance;
- It has genuine real-world importance, impacts learners in their subject choices and consequently their life chances, and therefore has implications for the structure of society itself;
- It is criticised by many, including senior examiners; and
- Calls for action are sometimes 'naive', assuming that there is a straightforward solution.

One of the important issues when discussing comparability and standards is to understand their definition. The definition of 'standards' is confusing as the word has several meanings. Educationally, raising standards means both 'expecting more of students' and 'expecting more students to be able to demonstrate performance at a given level' (Baird, 2007, p.124). The regulatory authorities, such as Ofqual, define the term standard as 'the assessment standard, which is the height of the hurdle' and the focus of Ofqual's work is to maintain that standard every year (Boston, 2008, p.3). Pring et al (2009) suggest that it is meant to be

the benchmark by which we judge an activity (academic or practical) to have been successful. To say that someone has learnt something means that their thinking or their performing meets these implicit benchmarks of doing it well. (p.75)

Therefore the standards should represent learners' achievement in their chosen subject.

It is also important to understand the context in which term 'comparability' is used.

Comparability is always relative to a particular use or interpretation.
(Coe, 2007, p.161)

Oates (2007) writes that different forms of comparability combine with different definitions of standards, as well as different views on the purpose of the assessment, examinations and education. Newton (2007) agrees that the critical issue in defining comparability is the inference that is drawn from examination results to support a particular purpose. He illustrates the relationship between uses of examination results and concepts of examination comparability by the following three assessment purposes:

- Qualifications – results are used to judge whether a person is sufficiently qualified and competent for a job or course;
- Selection – results are used to predict which applicants, out of the few who are sufficiently qualified, have most potential to succeed in a job or course; and
- Programme evaluation – aggregated results are used to evaluate the success of educational programmes or initiatives, nationally or locally.

It is not difficult to see that different purposes require A-level results to be interpreted differently. It begs the question whether the same data can be used for so many different purposes.

In the next section, I discuss my respondents' views on the importance of standards and comparability within A-levels. In particular, I was interested in the extent to which my respondents thought 'standards', however defined, were the reason behind the Labour government's decision to keep A-levels, instead of replacing them with a unified diploma system as suggested by Tomlinson's review. Because standards refer to several possible areas of A-levels comparability, I focus this discussion on two particular issues:

1. did respondents think A-levels were getting easier? (comparability over time), and
2. did they think that some A-level subjects were easier or 'softer' than others? (comparability across subjects).

6.1.2 Comparability over time

Today, over 40 per cent of the cohort takes A-levels, with higher pass rates, and many attaining high grades (Hodgson and Spours, 2008). This leads to arguments that standards have declined. However, the fact that the number of those getting good grades has increased over time may have several explanations apart from being seen as evidence that assessment standards have been 'dumbed down'. Those in charge of monitoring standards, such as the former CEO of Ofqual, Katherine Tattersall, warn that the system is expected to provide a greater degree of accuracy, reliability, consistency and precision than is possible on judgements that are mainly qualitative rather than quantitative (Tattersall, 2007). Perhaps most importantly, A-level specifications have changed over time, and in particular changes to A-levels themselves could have had an enormous impact. As De Waal (2009) suggest:

Assertions about higher grades being down to an intangible notion of declining 'standards' is a side-show contention when considering the wholesale structural change to examining arrangements. That is, the way in which performance has been aided by multiplying the exams, narrowing in on highly specified content and providing the opportunity to improve grades through re-sitting. Whether the actual content of A-level courses is less challenging or not is fairly peripheral in the discussion around whether linear and modular A-level performance is comparable. (p. 4)

Ofqual claims that the grades today are not strictly comparable with grades obtained under the previous A-level systems. Curricular and grading changes were made, including the shift from norm-referenced and qualitative judgements to a weak criterion-referenced and statistical grading approach. This has led to an increase in the percentage of learners succeeding in A-level (Tattersall, 2007). In addition, the increase in A grades could be due to changes to the structure of the exam rules and better support being provided by awarding bodies, or simply more targeted teaching (Mansell, 2007). The number of learners, both in absolute and percentage terms, getting A grades continues to rise. This is despite more learners

taking exams and the proportion of the very lower grades remaining constant (JCQ, 2009).

In recent years, universities have complained about the ability of A-levels to provide the information necessary for them to select the best learners. The usual argument is that universities need to maintain academic standards. It is not their job to re-educate learners whose compulsory education has failed. However, the evidence shows that A-levels have a long term predictive validity for undergraduate and postgraduate careers (McManus et al, 2003). As Stringer (2008) suggests:

In practice, evaluating selection tools/criteria within the context they are used is difficult, because one rarely knows how good the rejected applicants would have been at the job/course they applied for. They may have turned out better than the selected applicants did ... (p.54)

As a result of this issue, some universities have introduced entrance exams. Aptitude tests, such as US-style SATs are also thought of as a good alternative. However, as Stringer (2008) states, their use for university selection would not be a fairer system towards those from disadvantaged background. This is because it is invalid to assess suitability for university, using measures of skills purportedly immune to study. It is unfair to allocate opportunities according to qualities acquired by chance. There is no evidence that aptitude tests are fairer predictors of future success or a solution to widening participation, because they do not take into account the value of experience and acquired knowledge, motivation and study skills. He further argues that alternatives are available. However, these are not practical, such as adopting a more holistic approach to selection through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures.

All this has led universities to put pressure on the government to reform A-levels and for them to resume their original purpose, as a selection tool for universities. The difficulty of differentiation between learners mostly affects very few selective universities, usually those with a great deal of 'cultural leverage'. Hence they have a strong voice in the policy process (Hodgson and Spours, 2008, p.48). As a result, an A* grade has been introduced at A-level to allow discrimination between high-achieving candidates. The fear is that this will further disadvantage state-educated learners (Sykes Review, 2010). However, A* will avoid the need for yet

another test to learners who have spent thirteen years in school and were tested more than any of their contemporaries elsewhere in the world (Wolf, 2004). The success of this change will rest on universities' approval and acceptance of the A* grade.

Participants of my study were asked to express their opinions on the issue of A-levels and standards. Most of the non-HE respondents reported that they do not think A-level standards have changed over time. They suggested that some of the reasons for perceived change in the standard were:

- Their structure is different – modularity has led to an increase in good grades as learners can improve their grades by retaking some (or all) of their modules until they are satisfied with the mark obtained.
- Accessibility issue - different types of learners are now taking A-levels (e.g. gender). For example, proportionally more girls now take A-levels than before, and girls tend to do better at exams therefore leading to more good grades overall.
- Syllabuses have changed – subject matter changes over time, making comparison over time difficult. For example, ICT today is not the same as ICT twenty years ago.
- Exam familiarity – as one of the most tested nations in the world, it is possible that English learners have become more proficient in taking exams to the best of their advantage.
- Improved intelligence – learners today may indeed simply be more 'clever' than 50 years ago.

The following are some examples of the replies:

Standards are taken to mean that grade in let's say an English A-level now should be of the same value as it was 30 years ago. Bearing in mind the world itself had changed and our expectations change, this is incredibly difficult question to answer. I mean, would an ICT qualification from 10 years ago be the same as now – and should it be? ICT is a stark example but all subjects are like that to a certain extent. And in some sense certain things will get harder and harder, because like comparative literature, there is more of it!
(GA)

There is a whole range of reasons I think. 20-30 years ago, the gender balance of people taking A-levels was very different, and since girls do better in the exams than boys, if you have a

significant increase in girls taking a subject or A-levels in general, you will get an increase in the outcome – and that is exactly what happened. The possibility of retakes because of the modularity of subjects may have had an influence, but the evidence we have is that they don't get better as much as you expect them to. There is of course also the exam familiarity, and the level of information on what an exam expects – you can look at old papers and mark sheets. (R)

..... what has changed is accessibility to that standard. So the biggest climb in grades happens after 2000, as these more accessible systems became modularised and learning and coaching strategies improved, as is the accountability system. But standards in subject is defensible. But capabilities of students have increased, and that is why now is the time to ask them to do more! So the Bac concept is an answer to this, not a distraction, a logical next step. (R)

A-levels are different today than they were years ago! And because they can retake some modules, they can work towards the marks they want and inevitably you will end up with high proportion of students getting high grades. And I mean delivery of A-levels now is better than it was, schools and awarding bodies can support students more now than before. And I know that there is some teaching to the test too, again linked to league tables. So I don't think I buy into the argument that A-levels are easier to do, but they are done in a different way now than before so that invariably results have improved and that may not necessarily be a bad thing ... (GA)

I mean if you use the analogy of Mount Everest, its height hasn't changed but more people do it. It is possible that through the evolution, kids' IQs have improved. (R)

However, HE respondents in particular were adamant that A-levels are not as good now as they were before. As one HE admission tutor says:

I mean I have been concerned for years that the standards have been dropping, and I don't believe in this talk that they are the same, not true! I haven't kept a copy of the past papers, so it is very hard to do a comparison. And the IB has retained a similar proportion of students doing very well. So I am now suggesting that rather than making a grade offer, we now ask for 78 per cent of marks, and if we get too many then next year we will jack it up to 83 per cent! It is the only way to get some control over it because we have lost control! The fact that we had UMS data was useless if we can only make offers based on grades. But all this requires a lot more data processing, for example this term we were asking for A grade in all their six modules, and on top of that we get from UCAS modular marks, and it all takes a long time to sort out. And a grade

inflation goes on, they are going to introduce A now, and what next, A**? And that really contradicts this idea of a gold standard.*

In response to the belief from HE that standards have declined over years, a couple of school representatives' responses were highly pertinent:

I mean some universities have been whinging now for at least 15-20 years about erosion of standards in A-level, and how we have more students getting As now. I'd like to know what proportion of kids now get 1st class honours, and if it is higher (and I suspect it is) then 20 years ago, does that mean that their standards have been eroded too? And how can these kids, who they claim are not as good as kids 20 years ago because they don't know as much, be doing better at universities? There are only two possible explanations – either standards in A-levels are as good as they were and kids are as prepared as they were, or their teaching has become so bloody brilliant that their teaching technique is making up for the deficiency of skills and knowledge..

Of course, Universities complain bitterly that A-level students are rubbish, and they have to do these refresher courses in order to get them to stay on their own two feet, and yet HE is turning out the most fantastic results, so seem to be spectacularly good at teaching! It is incredible that there is no link made of their success to A-levels. Especially since teaching and assessment is very varied across HE.

It was also suggested that other countries do not have this 'obsession' with standards. As one GA said:

And people like what they have done, they think what they did was much harder than what is done now and so hence in this country the maintenance of standards is seen as absolutely important. And it is not clear to me why this should be so. I mean there is no particular reason why you want standards of any exam to be consistent over time. What for? I mean what you are keen on is that there is a match at this moment of time with what is required for now and for the future. That is the validity we need. But in this country they have always had this preoccupation with standards and politically it was seen that to move away from A-levels would indicate to the world at large and to the Daily Mail reader that we were letting the standards slide.

But perhaps exactly because exam results carry a political dimension, they cannot be an objective measure of standards. Cresswell (2000) writes that results are neither an objective measure of the progress of our education system, nor a reliable quantitative indicator of long-term changes in educational standards, and were never meant to be. He argues that this is because exam grades' main

purpose is to act not as a measure of standards over time, but as means of selection for universities and employers, where learners are mainly compared with those in their cohort. The Conservative party report (The Sykes Review, 2010) agrees that the question of whether overall gains in achievement are real, or the result of changing curricula, standards and assessment, is actually irrelevant at the level of the individual learner. This is because the A-level should differentiate adequately among individual applicants without being distorted by other demands made on it. However, as Davies and Edwards (2001) write, it is impossible to separate standards from curriculum content and pedagogical practice. This in turn raises questions relating to the complex, and inevitably contentious, relationship between educational purposes and the school curriculum and, further, the implications of this for what constitute educational standards. The purpose of A-levels is something I discuss more fully later in the chapter.

In conclusion, it appears that a simple, linear comparability of A-level standards over time is irrelevant, extremely difficult to prove, and at times, may be a dangerous distraction. As Newton (2005) suggests:

We have allowed myths to develop which, due to their longevity, are now extremely hard to challenge. This has been particularly true in relation to the linking of examination standards over time. For example, in England, ever since the subject-based A-level examination was introduced in 1951, the boards responsible for examining and certification have claimed—with each successive year—to have successfully linked standards from the previous year's examinations to the next. If so, then the 'obvious' corollary is that the 1951 pass standard in any subject must be comparable to the 2005 pass standard. Yet, the A-level has changed radically over time, and no one who genuinely understood the implication of those changes would sanction such a simplistic inference. (p.106)

6.1.3 Comparability across subjects

Comparability across subjects refers to:

the application of the same standard across different examinations.
(Newton, 2007, p.29)

In reality, applying the same standard across different examinations is a very complex issue. There is a perception that particular A-levels are either 'soft' or 'hard' subjects, with a clear implication that some A-levels are easier than others. As such perhaps they should not be accepted by HE as equivalent to more

demanding courses. The concern is that learners may take 'softer' subjects to obtain the higher grades and increase their chances for the best university place. Schools may encourage this practice as it is beneficial to their position in league tables. Indeed, Ofqual evidence shows that this has led to changes in the pattern of entries for awarding bodies, as schools sought courses that would provide their learners with best results. This has raised the claim that awards were affected by market considerations and that the examining boards' standards were, therefore, inconsistent (Tattersall, 2007).

There is considerable evidence that A-levels differ in their difficulty levels. Research by the CEM centre at Durham University by Coe et al (2008) demonstrates that A-level grades and the UCAS point scoring system, which treats all subjects as equally difficult, is incorrect, as some subjects at A-level are more difficult than others. Around 250,000 A-level results were analysed using five different statistical methods, and they found that the STEM subjects (the traditional sciences, biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics) are generally harder than other subjects and that it is easier to achieve top grades in subjects like Media Studies and Psychology. They have found that there is a difference of 1-2 grades between the hardest and the easiest academic subjects. Differentials of this size mean that direct grade comparisons even across A-level subjects are of limited value. These findings are contrary to QCA's findings which claimed that there are no substantial differences in standards between any subjects at any level (QCA, 2008).

Interestingly, Coe et al (2008) write that there is a reasonable level of consistency in the statistical relative difficulty of subjects from one year to the next (average correlation is 0.94). They conclude that the variation in difficulty of different subjects is about ten times the within-subject variation over the three years analysed. They suggest that the official line is that the comparability across different subjects is too problematic to define, but that the system is trying to keep the standard the same for different subjects. However, the conclusion is that the comparability of standards over time appears to have taken precedence over the need to ensure comparability across subjects. The statistical evidence suggests that one cannot do both. If we accept that A-levels are different and that their comparability is difficult to prove, how do you then equate different subjects, since they have different 'value'?

Participants in my study were asked their opinions on the issue of comparability across subjects. The majority of respondents accepted that there are variations in A-level subjects, since they are different in their nature and skills required. However, overall this has always been the case and is the product of providing choice to learners. A couple of HE respondents said:

There are soft options, but I think there always have been. Nothing has changed, we always did look on certain A-levels as less good. We are quite lucky at our university as we can stay away from this debate, since we can clearly make our science subjects a requisite. But even in science we, for example, wouldn't accept Psychology for anything but medical course, all other courses would deem it to not be scientific enough! And that was always the case, everyone knows that.

It is interesting that institutions are now coming clean, because this has always been the case. They are just honest now because they are being urged to be more transparent. What they will say is that we will take certain percentage of 'soft' A-levels but only a small number, or accept it as a third A-level. The argument being you are not prepared for their subject if you didn't do certain subjects.

A few respondents (S) implied that the talk about 'soft' subjects is just another way to make A-levels more elitist. For example:

Yes, I think this talk of 'soft' and 'hard' A-levels is unfair. I work in a college which is very much defined by its inner city characteristics, many students here claim education maintenance allowance, are from families on income support, nonetheless 75 per cent of them will go on to university and for at least half of those they will be the first generation in their family to do so. So if we want social mobility in this country, and if we want its citizens to be excited by the future and have ambition, than we need a curriculum that is accessible to them and that is generous in its diversity and its range. And that means that it can't just be Aristotelian, it has to have variety of subjects.

There is diversity in A-level offer too – all that talk of soft and hard A-levels! Whether they are soft or hard A-levels is immaterial, the point is that A-level curriculum has sufficiently diversified from what it was 20 years ago, and become more generous in its definitions, to engage a whole lot of cohort of students that would never have done A-levels when I did them and you only had a choice of 10. And those 10 were the traditional, academic A-levels. That softens and dilutes the parity of esteem thing anyway.

There was a widespread acknowledgement that comparability across subjects is a complex issue and that universities may find it hard to make the right decision.

Overall, the suggestion seemed to be that universities should be more transparent about which subjects they will accept for which courses.

Are all A-levels the same? It is a difficult thing, but not all of them are treated the same. QCA did some work of comparability between A-levels, and I think University of Durham did too, but it is very difficult at the end of the day to have absolute standards on A-levels because they are not the same, you are testing something different. And media studies vs. physics debate will go on. But I suppose a lot of it depends on what that particular line of learning actually requires. So for example, if you are going to go to university to do physics then that's what you should do, if you are going to study media then do that! The problem is that we are talking about grades, and if university says they want three Bs to get on a course, you can use any A-levels to do that, so you might choose 'easier' ones? (GA)

I think it is probably more of a problem now, because there is a more widespread understanding that students can do A-level in media or photography or similar, and that it is less academically challenging than A-levels in physics. Of course the argument is that you are not testing like with like! I guess at the end of the day, what you have to look at is what that A-level qualification is being used for. So the student who's got 3 A-levels in let's say media study, photography and English, against the student who's got A-levels in maths, science and physics, well clearly the first one is not qualified to come and do an engineering degree! And the second one is not equipped to do theatre studies! (HE)

The study findings suggest that comparability across subjects is a recognised issue that HE in particular have to consider. However, the majority agree that the issue can be addressed by clear selection criteria from universities. Bassett et al (2009) suggest that the judgement of university admission tutors and recruitment personnel should be trusted. This sentiment is illustrated by one of my respondent's answer:

Well, it's up to Universities on what they do, and how they treat A-levels, and clearly they do distinguish between them. I mean exam boards do subject comparisons, and there are subjects where students do better than in others. But, A-level Greek always has top grades so you can conclude that it is an easy subject, but actually it is extremely difficult. But of course, you only do Greek here if you are extremely talented and gifted in languages or if you are of Greek origin! And it is only offered at best schools anyway (how many schools would have a Greek teacher) and the classes are small so there is a lot of individual tuition. So you are not going to do Greek unless you are confident you are going to get A anyway. It just shows how misleading judging subjects on grades is! (R)

6.1.4 Concluding thoughts on *Comparability of standards*

Comparability of exam standards is clearly very difficult to achieve. For two learners to be awarded the same grades on average, no matter which examinations they entered, all the characteristics that have a legitimate relationship with examination results must be controlled, such as their ability and motivation, the quality of the teaching and learning support and the amount of studying. Yet research suggests that disentangling the examination standard from the features of the candidates who take the examination is impossible (Baird et al, 2000). It is also difficult to make sensible comparisons over time since the exam system has changed substantially over the years and A-levels underwent major changes in 2000 and again in 2008. The system is now more flexible, mainly through modular exams and the possibility of re-sits, which makes it more tailored to learners' needs. Furthermore, the expansion of A-level choice allows learners a greater possibility of choosing subjects in which they believe they will succeed (Mansell, 2007). Schools are also getting more support from the awarding bodies, which, Mansell (2007) argues, offer 'tellingly detailed syllabuses' and 'better' advice on what they are looking for in the exam. In addition, anecdotal stories suggest that the markers are encouraged to err on the side of leniency because they are competing with rival boards for schools' business.

So how can reliability of results be ensured? Newton (2005) states that examination results can never be perfectly reliable, valid or comparable. What they can do is to ensure that majority of learners are judged and rewarded fairly. He urges the public to trust assessment results, and the agencies responsible for producing them. The answer may also be to stop insisting on reliability and focus more on validity. As one of my respondents said when asked if he has confidence in standards:

I have more confidence that they are reliable, I have absolute certainty that they are invalid. (GA)

Others agree about the importance of validity. Bassett et al (2009) suggest that most of the developments in education exams have been a result of the battle between reliability – ensuring consistency of and comparison between results – and validity – ensuring that results reflect learners' abilities and knowledge. The desire for reliability has diminished qualitative assessment and, as Baird (2007)

proposes, there should be an increase in the use of criterion referencing (when subject matter experts judge the quality of learners' work against the criteria or standard) of exam papers in the future.

What came across very clearly in the study was that everyone accepted that standards were a high profile issue that is often misunderstood. The majority expressed confidence in A-level standards despite the previously mentioned issues. This factor was cited as possibly one of the main reasons for keeping A-levels. The overall conclusion was that 'at least' A-levels have standards. Many were aware that after years of protecting this 'gold standard', it would be difficult for the government to abandon it altogether. As one GA said:

Of course, that might be the main reason that the government does not want to end A-levels, because we have standards for them, and if you are to replace them, you wouldn't have that. It would be a huge risk!

Having accepted this as one of the reasons, I was interested to find out what else participants of my study thought was behind the A-level programme's enduring pre-eminence.

6.2 Parity of esteem

Another characteristic of A-levels is that they are an academic qualification. As such they are used to separate those learners who are academically inclined from those who are not, reinforcing a divided system. The academic route appears to be the more valued one, as it is more likely to lead to university and a professional occupation. As Hodgson and Spours (2008) suggest, the status of vocational learning appears to be determined by the dominant role of selective academic education, the reactive role of vocational education, and weak employer engagement. Taken together, these three factors lead to what has been termed 'academic drift' (p.88).

Apart from the type of school they attend, learners are also separated by the type of qualification they take, having had to achieve at least C grade in any GCSE subject (usually at 16) in order to study that subject at A-level. If they do not achieve good enough GCSEs, they are more likely to take some sort of vocational qualification. It is suggested that England is the only developed, industrial country

to insist on such early selection (IPPR, 1993), where only a proportion of learners will then continue into higher education.

This section starts by providing a brief overview of academic and vocational education in England, before focusing on the issue of parity of esteem today in my participants' views. The section ends with my concluding thoughts.

6.2.1 Academic vs. vocational education

Higham and Yeomans (2011) write about the constant review and changes of vocational qualifications, suggesting that this may be due to the lack of clarity as to the purpose of vocational qualifications. If vocational education is a true alternative to the academic route, then it should allow learners to progress to higher education. Hoelscher et al (2008) found that despite the Labour government's attempt at 'parity of esteem', the traditional A-level route, rather than a vocational background, was still the main route into high reputation universities. A recent Review of 14–19 Vocational Education in England (Wolf, 2011) suggests that about a third of vocational provision does not provide for clear progression into higher levels of education and employment. Wilde and Wright's (2007) research noted that the problems with progression to HE from vocational routes are partly associated with difficulties in understanding vocational qualifications and a lack of clarity about what is included.

On the other hand, perhaps the purpose of vocational qualification is mainly to practically prepare learners for a workplace. As Fitz-Gibbon (1997) suggests, whilst the instrumental view of the qualification is true of both academic and vocational routes, these values are only emphasised in the term 'vocational'. If so, as Fuller and Unwin (2011) state, it is questionable whether the government should fund vocational provision, if all it is doing is accrediting skills that can be gained in the workplace or through apprenticeships. Yet, as the Wolf Review (2011) suggests, good apprenticeship programmes remain too rare. Or perhaps, as Hatcher (2008) suggest for the 14-19 Diplomas, the possible purpose of vocational education may be in keeping lower-achieving learners in education until they are 18, especially relevant now with the suffering labour market.

In addition to this lack of clarity, vocational education has also traditionally been perceived to indicate particular social standing. As Fitz-Gibbon (1997) suggest, the

qualification not only suggests what the holder knows, understands and is able to do, but also what he/she is like in terms of social origin, ability and ambition.

Edwards (1997) writes:

The persistent devaluing of vocational education, although increasingly challenged in policy rhetoric, reflects entrenched assumptions about the kinds of learning appropriate for future leaders and for even their most skilled followers. Different qualifications or the lack of any qualifications at all, have served to allocate young people to different levels in the labour market. (p.1)

Young (1998) argues that the stratification of knowledge in the curriculum (through the academic and vocational divide) and the patterns of social inequality and distribution of power in the wider society are linked. Traditionally, the education of the elite has usually been based upon a 'liberal education' in a variety of academic subjects, while vocational education (in the form of preparing learners for work) has been reserved for the masses (Whitty, 2002). Therefore achieving parity of esteem between the two pathways, and increasing the status of vocational qualifications, has always been on the agenda of successive governments.

However, despite the various attempts to achieve the parity of esteem, it still remains an elusive goal. As Hodgson and Spours (2008) suggest:

Despite constant policy intervention by successive governments over the last 30 years, vocational learning and the work-based route are still struggling with issues of status, size, quality and role. (p.94)

Edwards (1997) argues that the defence of A-levels is rooted in culture based on 'old-humanist' resistance both to 'vulgarising culture' to make it more accessible, and to giving technical and vocational education anything like equality with a 'liberal training of the mind' (p.12). This 'disbelief that so many are really entitled to take an academic route long kept exclusive' (p.13) leads to support for alternative vocational pathway, and is probably another reason why no unification framework has yet materialised. This implies that there are those who want academic education to remain exclusive and elitist. Lumby and Foskett (2007) agree, suggesting that

The steady growth in the value of vocational pathways has been a strongly espoused political aim of successive governments, yet it is equally clear that this has not been achieved, and that the rhetoric

reflects a political ideal of change that has insufficient force and momentum to overcome strong resistance to the notion across much of society. (p.92)

Whether there is a true resistance to creating a unified system, or whether there are other reasons why there is such a divided system, is something that the next section examines.

6.2.2 Parity of esteem today

As previously mentioned, in 2004, under Sir Michael Tomlinson, a working group of educational experts proposed an integrated framework for qualifications. This included an over-arching diploma containing an academic and vocational stream that can be mixed and include more stretching A-level questions.

As part of my research into A-levels, I have asked my respondents why they think Tomlinson's review recommendations, in particular the proposal for overarching diploma, were not implemented fully. Several respondents suggested that one of the reasons was that the Labour government wanted to champion vocational education through the introduction of new Diplomas, but at the same time did not want to risk destabilising A-levels, something they think Tomlinson's recommendations may have led to. For example, respondents suggested:

I think the reason Tomlinson wrote that review was to promote vocational education. He wanted to give vocational qualification the same footing as the academic, but in reality they were not proposals for an overarching system, they were proposals for something that would work well in vocational education, a model of vocational education if you like, that he wanted to see rolled out more generally. And that is why it failed quite so substantially. (R)

Tomlinson thought that you can get a parity of esteem by just calling different qualifications by the same name, and organising them in the same structure, but I really don't believe that that works. University would just break the qualification into the modules, and concentrate on the modules they are interested in. They do that already, if you look at Cambridge, they already are on the record as accepting only certain subjects and not the others, and that just crystallises the way the system works. So to think you can just bring in vocational qualifications and treat them the same as academic is just utterly naive. I think the whole Tomlinson review was just based on false premise really. (R)

I was also interested in the argument that post-16 education is traditionally segmented and stratified alongside social lines. Macrae et al (1997) suggest that learners are often allocated on a certain route based on class and/or race, often by careers services presenting 'realistic' choices. My participants were asked to provide their opinions on this issue. There was a general acceptance that vocational education in this country is stigmatised as second-best and more suitable for 'some'. For example:

This then makes you question why different kinds of students do different kinds of qualifications, since it segregates students and it inevitably has impact on how people see themselves, and they may think that if they are not doing A-levels, they are doing something less good, that's always been a perception and always will be, at least in this country. In other countries, like Germany, the vocational side is more respected. In this country it was always the case that certain kinds of students were more excluded than others, not only along the lines of the class system like it was originally set up, but more that a certain type of meritocracy has evolved over time, that if you know how to play the game, you can get through the system, and the others get stuck in the vocational education. And that is a problem, not for kids who do A-levels, but for a society in general. (R)

I mean we have a shortage of skills in this country and vocational education is just as important. But there is this snobbishness in this country about it, this idea that somehow it's not acceptable not to have academic qualifications and that everyone has to go to university. I think it's a class thing, we are just perpetuating it by being snobbish about the vocational route. (HE)

Some of my respondents suggested that the snobbishness towards vocational education arose as the consequence of grammar school politics. The fact they were abolished because they were 'unfair' to those who did not get in, therefore implies that not going down the academic route is 'inferior'. For example:

It is very odd in this country this snobbishness about vocational education, I don't know if it got caught up in comprehensive education, which has come with some political baggage. When I was in school you either went into a grammar school or you went into secondary modern, and that was a big divide and a big decision to have been made at perhaps too early an age. That said, the secondary modern education, although perhaps it didn't have enough academic staff, was very good for preparing youngsters for a world of work. And I think that somehow got lost in the whole comprehensive scheme of things that you should never stream kids too early and close off avenues. (GA)

In the old days, when I was a student there were a lots of apprentices, so you could go do that, get a job and take a pride in what you've achieved. And should they still want to go further, they could, they could go back to a mature FE college and catch up and go to college. But now they don't value the vocational side at all, and the divide is enormous. (HE)

We need to stop pressuring people into universities, not everyone is suited to it, and there are many genuine alternatives. This snobbism about vocational education didn't exist years ago, it very much started with the grammar school demise. (HE)

Another problem seems to be the inconsistency of policies in vocational education, best understood by the sheer number of vocational qualifications. Throughout the years, many vocational qualifications, such as GNVQs and 'Vocational A-levels', were developed and introduced and then abolished. It is possible that this will be the case for the 14-19 Diplomas. There was agreement that one of the problems with the new Diplomas is this very perception of them being a vocational qualification and as such not as good as A-levels. For example:

But of course the problem is that whilst this academic route remains, A-levels will continue to be seen as a higher, more prestige, qualification. I think that's where the government went wrong, this was what Tomlinson wanted to avoid, by introducing Diplomas alongside A-levels, they never got a chance to stand on their own, but were rather seen as a weaker alternative to A-levels. I mean snobbery about the vocational route will always exist, but this just made it worse. (HE)

And the fact that we now have these Diplomas, reinforces the divide between the academic and vocational route, it's like the old 11+ when you separated kids into streams and where we went wrong is that Secondary Modern Schools were not good. (S)

Through having introduced Diplomas as an alternative qualification, the Labour government not only avoided major changes to the current system (such as replacing A-levels with another qualification) but, it could be argued, also endorsed the divide between academic and vocational education, the very thing they claimed to want to change. The inherent snobbery about vocational qualifications trying to compete with A-levels was best illustrated by this HE respondent:

...So I said that there was no way we can accept that. We are just then undervaluing the students who are doing the A-levels! So that's where we are stuck at the moment, we did make a statement in last year's prospectus we would consider engineering Diplomas

students who have very good A-levels in maths or physics and that is still true but realistically if someone is bright enough to get A-level maths and A-level physics they are not doing Diplomas.

Others, in particular school representatives, liked the philosophy of Diplomas, and the fact they are composed of different parts that are not all vocational. They agreed that the main problem is that the attitude towards vocational learning often overshadows positive aspects of it. For example:

I quite like the philosophy of Diplomas, as I agree that we should try to stretch all our students as much as we can. I like the fact that a student who does an essentially vocational programme (I know we are not supposed to call it vocational, and I do like the term 'applied learning') should also keep an aspect of their general learning going, so I like the fact that someone can be doing a model which is essentially a business programme but supported by languages or maths. I always have liked the fact that there is a formal emphasis on acquisition of skills, core skills, I always believed in the philosophy of key skills. In my view, a skills based curriculum is a very sensible way to plan and assess learning.

It is clear that not all learners will chose to follow the academic route. Unwin and Wellington (2001) report that young people they interviewed for their research said that a choice of a work-based route was not in order to reject academic route. It was to combine academic and practical abilities, in addition to providing financial rewards in near future. There is a need for a debate on whether the main route for post-16 year-olds should be full time education or should perhaps include provision for employment and training to be increased.

6.2.3 Concluding thoughts on *Parity of esteem*

Pring (2008) proposes that the problems that the Labour government has identified during their review of 14-19 education (such as the academic/vocational divide, the low status attached to vocational, the decline of apprenticeships and work-based learning) are 'deep rooted, economically and socially' (p. 687), with no easy solution apart from yet another reform that may or may not work. Coalition government seems unlikely to be more successful in dealing with this issue, and indeed Hodgson et al (2011) suggest that there are indications (such as stopping the work on the 14-19 Diplomas, and involving selective universities in qualifications development) that Coalition government policies may deepen the

academic/vocational divide. So what is the future of the academic and vocational divide?

Some propose that an integrated 14-19 track (a single framework) would encourage the co-existence of academic and vocational education, preparing learners for further educational study in addition to providing practical, work-based experience (IPPR, 1993; Hodgson and Spours, 2008). Fuller and Unwin (2011) propose a model for vocational education that combines work based and 'classroom-based' tuition and experience, starting with a broad general education and some vocational education and in time becoming more (although not entirely) vocational. The idea behind this is that it would prepare learners for a vocational career without removing an option of progressing down the academic route.

I also believe that the best way to truly deal with the divided system is through unifying the 14-19 programme of study into a single framework with a common core but a flexible nature to allow for a degree of choice. This seems unlikely to happen in the near future, perhaps because some stakeholders – such as certain schools and selective universities – would be unlikely to support it. As Graham (1993) suggests, the private school lobby has power to hold ministers to the cause of A-level conservation, as that sector has a vested interest in retaining a qualification in which high success rates contribute substantially to a school's market appeal. My respondents suggest that universities also want to preserve the academic pathway and keep it exclusive.

What is certain is that the complicated issue of parity of esteem, and whose interests this divide serves, is another reason why A-levels are so resilient to change, since in their current form they are supporting this divided system. In addition, it would be difficult to design a system that caters for both academic and vocational education sufficiently. Some of my respondents suggested that you cannot meet the needs of every learner in one programme. To quote one GA:

And one of the weaknesses of Tomlinson, right from the word go, is that he had this picture that you can have the system which would meet 100 per cent of the needs of 14-19 education. There isn't a system in the world that does that! And trying to suggest that you can have this structure which would give you flexibility and be able to have different tracks through, and would meet the needs of the bright, and would have dealt with the problem of the lack of parity between academic and vocational education – the solution was

simply unproven. So that was a big issue and the government lost its nerve with regard to A-levels, because for some reasons A-levels are very popular. And without wishing to be needlessly nasty, they are popular because they are what people have done.

Perhaps, as Edwards et al (1997) suggest, we should not expect parity of esteem of academic and vocational qualifications but accept their 'different and equally useful' characteristics. (p.61) However, this would not necessarily change the associated and value-laden perceptions of the qualifications. Another way forward may be to allow A-levels to do what they were initially meant to do – act as an entrance tests for university, whilst tackling vocational education (with a genuine aim of raising its status) separately. As Halsall and Cockett (1996) write:

For all the high aspirations of the post-16 framework parity of esteem cannot be given by government edict. It will have to be earned. What students need to know is that they can make progress, that they are following a programme which does not lead up a blind alley. (p.70)

As for A-levels, being a selection tool for HE is not the only way they are used nowadays. Many learners decide against university but still prefer the academic pathway. I examine more fully what other purposes A-levels serve in the next section.

6.3 Fitness for purpose

This last part of the chapter on A-levels' resistance to change focuses on their fitness for purpose. The following paragraphs focus on my findings about A-levels' purpose before presenting my concluding thoughts on the topic.

6.3.1 A-levels' purpose

Over the years the nature of examinations has changed. The skills required by universities have become more clearly defined and this is meant to be reflected in the aims of the A-level curriculum. It is meant to be a curriculum based on argument construction, employment of evidence, expression of argument, note taking, distilling key points, assessing evidence and being able to distinguish between evidence and opinion. Some, for example Wilde and Wright (2007), argue that A-levels do not necessarily nurture these qualities. Learners today are more accustomed to working towards examinations and collecting marks towards

their final grade, rather than engaging with their subjects. They also suggest that learners' level of knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge have declined. Yet, England now has more learners going to university than when A-levels were first used, and there is a government commitment to raise the mandatory participation age in education or training to 18. Therefore are A-levels still a suitable preparation for university entrance?

A-levels are used as both norm-referenced tests and as criterion-referenced tests. They are used as norm-referenced tests in order to produce familiar proportions of high, medium and low scorers (individual performance in relation to that of their peers), necessary for A-level's selection purpose. As criterion-referenced tests they present a view of an individual that is used to decide what effective measures are needed to build on their strengths in order to aid their educational progress, necessary for A-level's general educational purpose (Gipps, 1996). Taking into account that initially they were designed as norm-referenced tests only, the question is whether today's A-levels are fit for serving these different purposes. The focus of my thesis was on their purpose as preparation for university, but it is worth remembering their other purposes.

A-levels currently serve several purposes that can be summarised as:

- selection (for either higher education or for employment)
- a secondary school qualification (certification that learner has achieved an advanced level of study), and
- monitoring and accounting (for stakeholders to monitor how schools are performing and for government to demonstrate the success of their policies).

In addition, as previously discussed, A-levels are also used as a comparability tool (to monitor standards over time) and, arguably, as a label for social segregation (assigning a value of 'academic' rather than 'vocational'). Newton (2007) argues that it matters when results are used for many different purposes. Different usages require that different kinds of inference be drawn from results. Therefore, results that warrant accurate inferences for one purpose may not warrant accurate inferences for another. The problem with A-levels (and consequently with replacing them) may be that whilst they remained relatively unchanged, the purpose to which the results are used have expanded.

Whilst all of the purposes listed above are important, one purpose to which all my respondents referred to was that they are used for selection of those learners who are best suited to higher education study. It was accepted that culturally, A-levels are what universities are used to and are therefore keen to maintain. Several respondents suggested that the reason we still have A-levels in this country is because universities want them. For example:

HE are keen on A-levels, partly to do with the issue of standards, the fact that they exist, and partly it's to do with A-levels and this country, I mean it's a cultural thing. Academic good, vocational bad! That's not necessarily the case, but that is perception. The A-level was always the qualification that prepared people for university, and in the days when A-levels were taken by a very small proportion of students, that was fine, but now... I think the main reason is that HE hates change. (GA)

I mean if you want to reform A-levels, you can do all sorts of things, you can add more coursework, you can change the grading scale, but the trouble is that they fit into a social educational context where big drivers are the HEs, and HEs want to have a selection mechanism so whatever you put in its place is going to have the same constraints as A-levels. (GA)

The perceived influence of universities on government policy regarding A-levels was also commented on:

I don't know. Genuinely... I suspect that there are some that would like to see A-levels go. But I also suspect that that is not necessarily for education reasons, as much as political reasons, partly because it would be seen as diminishing the power of HE sector, which I think is something that successive government will wish to do. (GA)

The perception is therefore that universities have a great deal of influence over A-levels and whilst they may be the primary driver behind them, they are also their biggest critics. Sykes' Review (2010) argue that A-levels must primarily do two things – indicate that learners have sufficient knowledge of the subject and they provide a means for selective universities to discriminate between learners. They concluded that A-levels currently fail to develop higher-level skills adequately and to allow universities to rank and select students effectively and fairly. The main issues cited were structure of A-levels (particularly modularisation) and the policy of 'equivalence' between subjects in a given qualification, and between qualifications.

Hodgson and Spours (2008) propose that the latest reform (2005-2013) was the Labour government's attempt to restore confidence in the selective ability of A-levels. This was to be achieved by putting more pressure on the broad vocational and work-based routes as they are expected to absorb 'refugees' from 'tougher' GCSEs and 'strengthened' A-levels. A* results have been available in 2010, and most universities have revised their selection criteria to account for them. Yet, A* may also increase the gap between private and state schools. Figures show that most A* grades were awarded to learners in private schools, just as the Sykes Review (2010) predicted that an A* grade would further disadvantage state-educated learners. Therefore, in addition to stratifying learners according to their alleged advanced study ability, A-levels may also stratify learners according to their background. This may further exacerbate social differences, as there may be less scope for social mobility. One GA provided the following comment:

From the Labour point of view though, they want to social engineer and allow more students from lower SE backgrounds access to HE. And A-levels become problematic because not many students from that background do well at A-levels. First of all, far fewer of them even take them in the first place, and those who do don't do terribly well. I don't have numbers at hand, but basically, almost everybody who gets 5 good GCSEs, including English and Maths goes on to an A-level programme. And everybody who does really well on an A-level programme goes to university. But at each of those hurdles, there are fewer and fewer poor kids who are actually on the programmes so that every impoverished child who has As gets offers from everywhere.

Those critical of the Labour government, such as Reform think-tank, argue that A-level's intellectual integrity was traded off for wider participation, but did not succeed in this goal (Bassett et al, 2009). They argue that increases in participation have flagged since the major changes to A-level in 2000, following acceleration in the 1980s and 1990s. They suggest that the ideological function of A-levels has changed, they are not so exclusive anymore, and therefore the loss of rarity status may be leading to the negative perception of them. This may be the reason why some public schools are turning to IB or Pre-U, they may be simply perceived as more elitist. As one school representative said:

I think IB carries a degree of kudos though, so it means even more. Perhaps IB is now what A-levels were 20 years ago! A-levels used to be elite, now it's IB, and elitism prevails at Universities.

The reason elitism may matter to universities is because they have limited space and core funding for undergraduate students. They need a qualification that will act as a hurdle and a filter, to enable them to choose the learners they need and want. It is therefore clear that trying to get as many learners as possible to achieve A-levels, and at the same time keep it as exclusive as possible, is not something that can be easily accomplished.

6.3.2 Concluding thoughts on *Fitness for purpose*

What should be the purpose of A-levels? Should it be to provide every 16 to 18 year-old with an advanced level education? Or should it be the preserve of those who plan to go to university? Can they do both? And how much should they be used as a political tool, whether it is in terms of monitoring the work of schools and teachers, or being used to check on progress of various education policies? As my study findings show, different groups think differently about them. Parents will want one thing from them, teachers another, and university administrators yet another. As a result, evaluating the fitness for purpose of A-levels is extremely difficult, since the 'purpose' of A-levels, or indeed of education in general, is not easily definable. I believe that what is required is a further debate about the function of education in general, not only A-levels.

There is a difference between a learner's record of education and record of achievement. I think A-levels are mainly used as an achievement record. What is clear to me is that what is lacking is recognition that A-levels are not just about grades, but also reflect learners' investment of time and effort into their education. It seems to me that only if you achieve C grade or above in A-levels, they count for something, and yet would not even a grade D be a record of a learners' education? Is reaching the gold standard not worthy in itself? Should it not be a badge of honour, especially since many do not even try? What seems to happen instead is that only those that get the very top grades are valued (when their achievements are not being devalued as not being quite as worthy as those 20 years ago), whilst the rest are lost in the space of failing to be the best and therefore not being much of anything. As one GA stated:

People, and by that I mean HE, are only concerned with selection but one's ability is bigger than their A-level result. In some countries, the very fact you have a school certificate gives you an

absolute right to go to university, and that is right I think. Education should be a right for all.

Boston (2008) has also raised an issue about the ambivalence of the purpose of education:

Is education a public good, the purpose of which is to ensure that each individual can delineate and fulfil his or her life choices; or is it a positional good, rationed in scope and quality, which confers a competitive advantage on recipients who are able to access it in abundance? Is the role of education to grow the national stock of human and social capital, or is it to sort out the wheat from the chaff? (p.1)

I would argue that education is a social and public good. Therefore it should be accessible to all and be there to improve the lives of learners and to prepare them for the future. However, as some have argued, educating people for personal fulfilment is contradictory with preparing them for work (Brosio, 1991). In addition, it is clear that education is intrinsically linked with, and influenced by, social structure. Even in countries with a relatively flat distribution of income and wealth and a good social support system, such as Sweden, the education attainment gap is not eliminated, and researchers conclude that social background remains the best predictor of it (Rotberg, 2004). Whitty (2002) writes that the reality of life is a more dominant discourse than social or cultural constructions

There is a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which local agency can challenge structural inequalities. Society reality is either taken for granted or ignored. ... if all schools performed as well as the best schools, the stratification of achievement by social class could be even more stark than it is now. (p.13)

Therefore it is questionable how much education can change social structures. This ambivalence remains. As Apple (2006) writes:

Education is a site of struggle and compromise. ...is both cause and effect, determining and determined. (p.30)

It is clear that this ambivalence about what purpose A-levels should serve is closely linked with their resistance to change. Until the purpose is clarified, the system will continue as it is. Successive governments have attempted to reform the 14-19 phase of education. By announcing its intention to raise the mandatory education and training participation age to 18 by 2015, the Labour government

indicated its hope for a coherent 14-19 phase of education in England. This could have ensured an uninterrupted upper secondary schooling and assisted learners in transitioning from school to adult working life. However, there were problems, such as Hodgson and Spours (2008) suggest:

this laudable aim is confronted by a formidable set of practical, structural and cultural barriers. Moreover, ... there is no settled view about the way forward in either the short or long term. (p.115)

We now have a different government, with its own views on the future of A-levels. Ultimately, there is bound to be caution with changing the system too much. This is not because the current system is necessarily the right one, but because the alternatives may not be much better. My next chapter focuses on this issue by presenting the findings on the potential alternatives and the thoughts from my study respondents on the future of A-levels.

Chapter 7 - Other options to A-levels now and in the future

Chapter 7 summarises my participants' views on other options to A-levels that currently exist, followed by their thoughts on the future of A-levels. It begins by providing an overview of other options before focusing on my study findings. It then proposes a possible model that can be created in the future. I complete this chapter by my concluding thoughts section.

7.1 Other options to A-levels

One of the issues with some of the other options to A-levels is that they are new and as such are perceived as a risk to the tried and tested system. As Tattersall (2007) writes:

...it seems to be the fate of all examinations, in England at least, to be criticised as soon as they have come into being as being irrelevant to prevailing educational opinion: it was true of the GCE in the 1950s, of the CSE in the 1960s, of the GCSE after 1988 and of the revised A-levels in 2002. Such criticism highlights the time taken to implement new concepts in systems where new courses, generally lasting for two years, need to have been approved at least 18 months prior to implementation. (p.66)

Other, more established, qualifications such as International Baccalaureate (IB), are faced with a cultural significance of A-levels and may be perceived to be a challenge to a prevailing social order. They may threaten a vision of little England, where 'our' culture is sacrificed for the sake of 'misguided relativism' instead of preserving educational standards and traditional values (Whitty, 2002).

Possible alternatives to A-levels are: the IB, Cambridge Pre-U, AQA Bac and the 14-19 Diplomas. The main danger with existing alternatives is that the attainment gap between schools in the state and private sectors is widening. Certain schools may increasingly turn to the alternatives that are suggested by some right-wing think tanks as 'better' – such as the IB (Bassett et al, 2009). Boston (2008) warns that if they continue to be popular, then alternative qualifications should be available in all schools rather than just the independent sector. This can provide a fully competitive market, with each qualification having its own niche and price point (Boston, 2008). The following paragraphs review some of these alternatives.

International Baccalaureate (IB)

The IB diploma is designed as an academically challenging and balanced programme of education with final examinations that prepares learners, normally aged 16 to 19, for university. The course comprises six chosen subject groups, an extended essay, a module in the theory of knowledge and participation in creative arts or sports and is normally taught over two years (IBO, 2010). IB is offered in about a quarter of local authorities in England and is costly to deliver and academically challenging. The Labour government's intention was to have every Local Authority offer it. This announcement might have been seen as:

a politically astute move and further evidence of the pursuit of a 'choice' and individual entitlement agenda to head off criticism which might force the government to think more radically about whole-system reform. (Hodgson and Spours, 2008, p.53)

IB number of entrants has increased by 42 per cent in the last two years in independent schools (Sykes Review, 2010).

QCA conducted a comparability exercise looking at A-level examinations and the IB diploma. The exercises presented formidable problems, as it was not comparing like with like. Two key differences between the qualifications were particularly difficult to overcome:

1. the IB diploma is a single full-time course of study leading to an overarching qualification. A-levels are single subject qualifications which can be taken by people of any age and in combination with or without any other qualifications, and
2. both qualifications have different grading scales.

The broad findings of the exercise were that A-level and IB examinations were comparable in the demands they placed on the learners at the level of the individual subject (QCA, 2003). Bassett et al (2009) agree that the IB does not necessarily provide a more effective preparation for university.

Cambridge Pre-U and AQA Bac

Cambridge Pre-U is a relatively new post-16 qualification, designed for high ability learners in order to prepare them with the skills and knowledge for university. It has a linear structure similar to old-style A-levels, when exams are taken at the

end of the two-year course. The argument is that this ensures coherence and progression, as well as the chance to reclaim teaching and learning time at the end of the first year. It decides the order, pace and depth of teaching and learning most appropriate for learners (CIE, 2010). Cambridge Pre-U syllabuses can be taken separately or combined in a full diploma. Even though it is not endorsed by the government, Pre-U has been accredited by Ofqual.

The first Pre-U results were not available at the time of writing this thesis, so it is quite difficult to fully compare the Pre-U with A-levels or the IB. The first cohort of Cambridge Pre-U learners made their university applications through UCAS in autumn 2009. Given that Cambridge Pre-U was a new qualification, the first application cycle was 'remarkably smooth', with the main issues arising from an initial unfamiliarity with the grading scale, all of which were clarified through the contact with the admissions office (CIE, 2010). Apart from being new, possibly difficult to teach, and relatively untried, some criticism of Pre-U is that its demand may have an effect on school's reluctance to offer it. As Martin Stephen, High Master of St Paul's School says:

I cannot write to my parents along the lines of: 'I have decided to enter your son for the new and highly demanding Pre-U examination, which makes him more likely to achieve less than the A grade 30 per cent of A-level candidates will receive, but don't worry; universities will understand...' Because I don't know if they will. (Stephen, 2008, The Telegraph)

The AQA Bac is a programme offered by the AQA awarding body. The programme consists of at least three A-levels, an extended project and takes into account any enrichment activities that learners take part in. AQA claims that the AQA Bac will help learners 'stand out from the crowd'. (AQA, 2011). Some of my respondents have commented on the popularity of AQA Bac, especially with state schools, and there are reports of universities (such as University of Exeter) claiming that the programme encourages

both specialism and breadth, set in the context of wider engagement with the community. It is preferable to the narrow specialism of the A-levels alone. (AQA, 2011)

AQA Bac is a good example of a way forward, since it recognises more than just grades achieved in A-levels. It provides a record of achievement for learners who study for it. However, universities still judge learner's suitability for their course

based on each individual A-levels studied, and the disadvantages of A-levels cited in this thesis (their structure, the focus on results, and their rigour) are not fully addressed by this qualification.

The 14-19 Diploma

Following the Tomlinson review (2004), the 14-19 Diplomas were conceived as an alternative to GCSEs and A-levels, with the aim of providing more choice for learners and raising post-16 participation in education. Boyle (2008) describes the 14-19 Diplomas as an 'umbrella' qualification, constituting various elements of freestanding qualifications and attempting to 'bridge the gap' between general and vocational qualifications. They are composite qualifications that combine theoretical study with practical learning and the extended project. The Nuffield Review (2008) describes the extended project as a major piece of an independent work that was envisaged to contribute to learner's development of learning skills, as well as motivate them to pursue a topic of their choice in depth. It can take different forms, ranging from an extended essay to a performance, is internally graded subject to external moderation. They suggest that it has limited scope, as it is confined to use within the 14-19 Diplomas and on an elective basis for Level 3 learners.

Pring (2008) suggests that the 14-19 Diplomas are what the Labour government wanted as their legacy—a new, innovative set of pathways that could become the pathway of choice. They have had a lukewarm reception from some schools and universities, who are unsure about their identity or their future. The Guardian (2009) reported that those of an equivalent level to A-level were taken up by only one in six, implying the difficulty they will face if they were to replace GCSEs and A-levels. Some right-wing writers argued that the 14-19 Diplomas were just another way for the Labour government to try to reform the system without changing it completely – 'If in doubt create a new qualification' (Haldenby et al, 2008). Most importantly, the fact that the 14-19 Diplomas were introduced alongside (rather than instead of) existing A-levels and GCSEs, has ensured that they could be perceived as inferior to the dominant academic qualifications. As such, they may be reinforcing the academic and vocational divide.

Since their introduction and with the new government, some changes to the 14-19 Diplomas were announced, namely that schools and colleges are no longer

obliged to offer them. The development of the final three 14-19 Diplomas in Humanities, Science and Languages has stopped, reducing them from 17 to 14 lines. The Coalition government claimed that

Ministers believe that it is not the role of the state to decide whether there is a need for new qualifications, and that attention should be focused instead on improving existing qualifications in these subject areas to ensure they are rigorous, challenging and properly prepare young people for life, work and further study. (DfE, 2011)

7.1.1 My study findings

At the time of conducting the data collection for this study (at the beginning of 2009), there was only one active alternative option to A-levels available to English schools, the IB. In addition, the first cohort of the new 14-19 review Diplomas was in place, although as I have already discussed, they were not perceived by many to be a genuine alternative to A-levels. This is not unusual. Tattersall (2007) has written about the depth of concern and strength of opposition in the 1940s before A-levels were introduced, illustrating how all new English qualifications and examinations tend to be criticized when they are first introduced as 'being irrelevant to prevailing educational opinion' (Boston, 2008). A new academic qualification, the 'Cambridge Pre-U', which I have described earlier, was not yet available in schools. Therefore the majority of discussion focused on the IB, and participants' thoughts on the 14-19 Diplomas.

Every participant in my study was familiar with the IB qualification. It was genuinely accepted by all as a highly respectable qualification. Respondents commented that they believe IB offers a more general curriculum that would allow development of broader skills than A-levels. However, most commented that it is an expensive qualification and would therefore be unattainable for most state schools. There was a perception of it being difficult and as such that it would not be as accessible to a large number of learners. Again, this illustrates one of the major paradoxes for A-levels – the need for qualifications to be suitable for a majority of learners whilst at the same time being selective (or 'elitist') enough for HE. For example:

The only real alternative is the IB. I think that IB is extremely good, but I am not sure how it copes with middle and low ability, it is a very demanding qualification. As a piece of curriculum it is very powerful. (GA)

IB is brilliant. But I don't think what we currently have with IB is sufficiently robust to cope with the numbers of candidates we have, if we suddenly switched it would probably have to be tightened up considerably. (S)

Well, the IB, I mean again it's not for us. For several reasons, first of all, it is a term end, sudden death, end of course examination, so, there is no chance really to have a go at it. It is fine for very bright pupils, who are going to get a score of 40+. Therefore you can crash and burn. And you will end up in probably not such a great university. (S)

I think it's pretty good. I don't know the actual syllabus that particularly well though... It's again peculiarly English that we think of them as something that is only available to more clever students. (GA)

It is great, but it would be like going back to what A-levels were 20 years ago when only a small proportion would manage to get top grades... Even private schools have a mixed ability intake, and if they went down the Pre-U route, a lot of their kids would not do well, and so they need A-levels. And state schools are saying it is even more divisive between the state and private sector. We would accept it as an alternative though. We want a qualification that is selective and that does the ranking of students, and also to make sure there is a rigour in the teaching. (HE)

In addition, there were a few comments that one of the reasons why A-levels would never be replaced by the IB is because A-levels are English, and as such carry a lot of cultural weight with them. As one HE respondent suggested:

Interestingly, in the type of HE institutions that I have worked in, the IB was perceived very favourably. They were considered to provide students with a wider range of skills than A-levels, as well as the broader overview, and the argument about depth didn't really seem to hold true. I think in some subject areas, like sciences, there might have been some gaps, but the students were well prepared for university, they could manage their time, and the lack of all facts didn't make a lot of difference. They like the Theory of Knowledge and the fact that students have to do language, etc. But we would never replace A-levels with them that would be appalling because we are British!!

However, if the IB was reported as too elitist and too difficult, the 14-19 Diplomas (as an alternative to A-levels) were not perceived as difficult enough. Although the 14-19 Diplomas were just starting to be offered at schools, most respondents had had experience of them through various consultations. HE respondents in

particular were very concerned about their suitability as a preparation for university. A few of the answers were:

We have looked at the 14-19 Diplomas, and I am sorry, but I don't think they are anywhere near the A-level standard, I cannot believe they are seriously implying that they are a genuine alternative with equal chances of getting into a good university!

And some universities can be very dismissive of new initiatives because they know the public won't understand it, how it was being delivered, and most importantly what the standard is going to be. These are the issues that are now facing the 14-19 Diplomas.

No, as I said the 14-19 Diplomas are not really an alternative as far as HE is concerned. They are not at all suitable. We want something that allows us to select the best students who will do well at our courses, to keep up the standard of our university, and that is hard enough to do with A-levels, let alone anything less hard.

The 14-19 Diplomas are not meant to replace A-levels, but there is clearly quite a strong steer from Labour party and some curious and quite a mistaken belief that when the review in 2013 happens, we will say 'oh the 14-19 Diplomas have been such a rip-roaring success that A-levels are unnecessary'. I don't think that they will find that to be the case. I am willing to be proved wrong.

There is a discussion taking place on the science Diplomas. We collectively looked at it about 6 weeks ago, and we just tore it to shreds as far as we are concerned. It doesn't have the rigour of A-level science!

However, there was a clear acceptance that the 14-19 Diplomas may be a good option for those learners for whom A-levels were not suitable. The consensus seemed to be that the 14-19 Diplomas are a good choice for those learners who want to stay in education, but are not necessarily planning to go to university (or at least not to a selective university). For example:

I am familiar with them as the College offer them, but I am not involved with them myself so I don't know much about it. I do think that some students are better suited to them than A-levels, as A-levels are rated higher and is a more intense mode of study, but students don't want that as they think A-levels are better, so regardless of whether or not they are suited to it, they want to at least try. (S)

Well, they are certainly feasible alternatives. Whether the 14-19 Diplomas will take off, only time will tell. It must be a good thing to

give students who want it an opportunity to study in the vocational sector, a more practical way of learning as opposed to all theoretical. That clearly ought to be a good thing. But I can't imagine them ever replacing A-levels. (R)

Yes, the school's policy is being considered by the committee next week, but yes in broad terms we will accept the 14-19 Diplomas as long as it has some additional elements. At least in the first instance. It's difficult, we don't mean to be dismissive of it, we have a duty of care to all students, and we must ensure that these students can cope with our programme so we need to tread carefully and how we proceed. (HE)

The acceptance of the 14-19 Diplomas as an alternative qualification, which may increase participation of learners in advanced study, is in line with other research. A recent Ofsted (2009) report presented the findings of the second year of a survey to evaluate the progress being made in implementing 14–19 reforms. While considering the impact of the full range of 14–19 initiatives, the focus was particularly on the 14-19 Diplomas and on functional skills. The report states that the effectiveness of the 14-19 reforms in raising attainment and extending the range of provision for young people was at least good in the majority of the consortia visited. The biggest impact was evident in a range of initiatives that encouraged participation and achievement of those learners traditionally at risk of disengagement from continued education and training (Ofsted, 2009).

However, one clear disadvantage of the 14-19 Diplomas that has emerged from my study is the complex nature of their implementation. Fletcher and Perry (2008) talk about the local scene being complex, and how new patterns of partnership can blur responsibilities as there is an unresolved tension between pressures to compete and exhortations to co-operate. As one school representative commented:

My biggest problem with the 14-19 Diplomas is that it is a complicated curriculum model; there is a lot in it. Complication isn't necessarily a problem, but there is really lots of different things in it and logistics.... Of course, you cannot do it all in your organisation, you have to do it across 3-4 institutions. Logistics are fiendish, moving students, health and safety, but also massive cultural obstacles here. the culture of educational provision in this country, whether the people want to own up to it or not, is a social market culture. I mean we are all very nice to each other on a personal level, but what you have got underneath is really fierce competition for students, or lets be blunt about it for the best students, so the whole culture is competitive. And suddenly, we

need to start talking about how we share students, and how we share developments, and we share funding, and there has been very little thought about preparation and training or even very clear leadership about this change.

The study findings indicate that even though the IB has existed for some time as an alternative to A-levels, and the 14-19 Diplomas are trying to be an alternative, the majority of respondents still favour A-levels. Indeed, when probed further about it, most commented that they still preferred A-levels to other qualifications. However, they also thought that they need to be modified. In particular, respondents suggested that they needed to 'recapture' their former rigour, and they needed to allow for greater breadth, but without damaging their current specialisation characteristic. The following section focuses more fully on the proposed future model for A-levels.

7.2 The future of A-levels

The market evidence suggests that A-levels are the best model we have at the moment and probably for the foreseeable future (Boston, 2008). Whether through choice or lack of alternative, they remain the main post-16 academic qualification for the great majority of learners, schools and colleges, universities and employers. One alternative to the current system is to do what has been done before, reform A-levels to be more like the 'old linear' A-levels. Young (1998) talks about the future that will build on the strengths of the existing system ('connective specialization vs. insular'). Bassett et al (2009) agree and write that action must be taken to re-link A-levels with their strong academic heritage. They propose that the renewed A-level should be available in all schools. This would give learners from all backgrounds the opportunity to study genuinely thought-provoking material, which equips learners properly for further study and provides Britain's economy with the sound academic foundation it needs.

Others suggest something more akin to creating a new unified diploma. Hodgson and Spours (2008) suggest a comprehensive and unified diploma system. This would combine features of baccalaureates and credit-based approaches. These can promote breadth and depth of learning, together with clear and flexible progression opportunities. The Baccalaureate style will provide coherence and breadth of learning, while the credit-based approach will support flexibility, choice and the gradual accumulation of achievement. Furthermore, as we are living in a

globalised age, it is possible that A-levels will have to be replaced with something that is more similar to qualifications in other countries, and more 'portable' (Boston, 2008).

Interestingly, my study found a genuine support for A-levels continuing in the future, albeit in a revised form. The majority of the respondents felt that in 50 years time, there would still be a qualification called the A-level, although it might be very different to today's model. Some of the comments were:

People like what they know. A-levels will only stop when the need for an outcome based on a 5 point scale stops. Of course, the alternative will still be called an A-level. (GA)

I cannot imagine them going. I just cannot see them disappearing. I can't see the future without them. We are so used to them, and creating something closer to the 14-19 Diplomas for academic subjects would be such a culture shock. (GA)

I think it would be wrong to lose them. I know we had them for 50 years, but they have evolved so much since then, and they are still changing according to the needs and as long as they continue to do that I don't see why we wouldn't have them. ...It meets the needs of many, not all but those are the ones we need to develop something else for. (HE)

I think very probably yes, they may have reformed again but as far as the basic concept of flexible specialist qualification goes for post-16, it will still be there. (R)

That's interesting, let me think. You know what, I think we probably will. I just cannot see that there will be any appetite to remove A-levels, because they do a good job. (GA)

Finally, there are those who think that the future is in some form of compromise. The model presented seems to be the one that is constructed in a way that keeps A-levels as an integral part and adds the new extended project. There is a widespread acceptance that the extended project is a useful tool for the development of independent research skills. Many schools (especially private schools) are encouraging their learners to take on 3 A-levels, a fourth AS level and an extended project. For example, one respondent said:

You see, we are sitting pretty here, because in a school like ours, we do a lot of the 14-19 Diplomas things anyway, and we think the rest of the country is trying to model itself on us. We do 3 A-levels,

we do AS levels, our brightest third will do critical thinking, they will all do community service of some kind or another (work in schools or hospitals, Duke of Edinburgh award, and that kind of thing) and they are developing skills as well. (S)

Others agreed that adding a project to A-levels will make it a less narrow curriculum. Many mentioned the AQA Bac as an example of the model that keeps A-levels at its core, but provides some breadth too. For example:

Yes, one of the things I wanted to mention is the AQA Bac. I think it covers the ground between A-levels and the IB very well. The choice is still there, you still use A-levels, but there are other things added to it. It's a wrapped up packages, using what's already out there, not coming up with anything new, but it does in some way address the narrowness of A-levels and through a project and diary it allows students to capture what they are doing, so it uses different set of skills. (R)

Yes, AQA Bac is doing exactly that, and I know that they believe there is a demand for something like that. That is a good compromise in terms of giving students a bit more and something overall to hold on to, it requires at least 3 A-levels, an extended project and some activity and there is another element to it. And centres are apparently signing up to this in great numbers. It's a great thing, since it requires minimal changes to the system and yet it provides what is seen as missing from pure A-level approach. (GA)

However, one issue that was raised about the new Bac model, which includes an extended project, is that it may increase the differences between schools, because not everyone would do it. There was disappointment that a clear steer from the Labour government about the extended project was missing:

But I still wish we had something like the 14-19 Diplomas, where everyone can do an extended project, some kind of independent learning study, I think that would have been a good thing. And Tomlinson's original idea was to make everyone do it. Instead you now have a situation where those kids taking the 14-19 Diplomas will do it, and then you have these other academic kids who are not! And everyone is looking at the top universities again for what they want, another one of those half baked initiatives, where no one knows whether to invest resources into it or not. (S)

What has happened in the wake of government rejection of Tomlinson, is that a chaotic pattern of English reform has emerged, with everyone trying to offer a broader curriculum to compensate for the fact that there isn't one. So you got IB, AQA Bac, Pre-U, 6th Form Bac proposed, and some local ones, it's just breaking out all

over the place. And what that does is act as a kind of irritant to the system. (R)

But of course, the extended project was not made into an entitlement by the government, largely due to the logistics of it, so it may disadvantage many students because schools don't have to offer it. (GA)

But, the extended project is not compulsory and this is a frustration. Why isn't there a general Diploma including an extended project? It wouldn't even be hard to do, just group existing things underneath an overarching award. What we were hoping was going to happen is that the Department was talking about the possibility of making the extended project an entitlement so that every centre had to make it available to students if they wanted it. It wouldn't even need a great infrastructure to support it. It's not a big step to make it an entitlement. But they are now saying they are not going to make it an entitlement. University said this is bad news as they were going to be asking students whether they have done it and now they don't think they can ask for it because it is not an entitlement. (GA)

Well, we are low priority but we do our best with the few high flyers that we've got, we like to show off and why not, we get our 2-3 students into Oxbridge per year, so we are going to ask those to do the project. The irony is that what you end up with is two completely diverse types of students doing the project – high flyer going to Oxbridge (because we think that is what they want to see) kids on the one hand, and handful of the 14-19 Diplomas kids slugging along doing their version of it in their own way, which will be equally valid don't get me wrong, on the other... (S)

7.3 Concluding thoughts on *Other options to A-levels now and in the future*

In conclusion, the respondents in my study reported conflicting views on possible alternatives to A-levels. Some reported that a model similar to AQA Bac would be preferable and many were particularly positive about the extended project. Creating a Bac-style model could account for the perceived narrowness of A-level. This was presented as a main disadvantage in the earlier chapter. The available alternative of the IB was reported to be too elitist, too expensive and 'not British'. The 14-19 Diplomas were accepted as a good alternative route for those learners who do not want to pursue an academic career, but were not seen as a possible replacement for A-levels. Many felt that there will continue to be A-levels in years to come. What was very clear is that the issue is not easily solvable. The fact that there is no simple solution, a straightforward alternative, may be another reason that contributes to A-levels' resistance to change.

In the concluding chapter, I refer back to the three main conclusions from my study on A-levels' resistance to change, and discuss further what the future for them may hold and why.

Chapter 8 - The End of the journey

Chapter 8 is the last chapter of my thesis. It consists of three parts. The first part is a summary of findings with subsections on contextualising the findings in policy making spheres, and on the starting points for the future. The second part is a reflection on the study, including discussion of some of the limitations of this research, the contribution to knowledge in the field, and some suggestions for future research. The final part is my concluding remarks on this topic overall. Even though the title of this chapter is *The End of the journey*, in many ways, my interest in this topic is only just beginning.

8.1 Summary of findings

My overall aim was to understand why, despite several reviews calling for them to be replaced with something else, A-levels are still endorsed as the main post-16 academic qualification. Drawing on the findings from my sample of stakeholders, the answer is a complex relationship of three issues.

First, there is the issue of standards. Rightly or wrongly, A-levels are an essential part of our political accountability system. The government use A-level results to check on the progress of post-16 education overall, whether in terms of policies or in terms of how well schools are doing. Any new qualification would suffer from a lack of historical benchmarked data to enable consistent accountability. Without it, there is no comparability, either across subjects, or over time.

Second, A-levels are the main academic route, clearly separate from the less well regarded vocational route. And in a country where status is an important defining characteristic, according to my interviewees, the distinction between living the life of knowledge (academia) and the application of such (vocation), still matters. There is still a need for an established qualification that can serve both routes (something that 14-19 Diplomas tried to achieve) as the gap between the value assigned to academic and vocational education remains.

Third, having started as a qualification meant to serve as a preparation (and a hurdle) for higher education, A-levels also need now to serve many more learners who are expected to stay in education after the age of 16. Not all of these learners want, or will be able, to go to university, but they are all entitled to a good education. A-levels are trying to fulfil both purposes, leading to accusations that they do neither job adequately.

I can therefore summarise that one of the answers why we still have A-levels is because it is the only post-16 academic qualification that has established standards and have so far managed to fulfil several different demands on its use, albeit not entirely successfully. This summary is fully supported by my research and it illuminates some of the thinking that went into the Tomlinson report. It demonstrates why it is so difficult to reform the system, because the system itself is very complex. This is mainly because it manages to support several purposes, whilst still retaining an exclusivity function due to the low status of vocational education in England. For reform to happen, what needs to change is not only A-levels, but the expectations of them to meet different needs.

An additional element supported by my research explains further why A-levels persist, even after the unprecedented support for the Tomlinson recommendations to replace them with a unified curriculum and qualifications framework. A-levels remain because those in power, who ultimately make these decisions, will it so. As one of my respondents stated:

...it's no more than lazy, nostalgic inertia, decision makers within the civil service, within our political class if you like, on the whole went to leading universities, did A-levels themselves, probably experienced them as intellectually exciting, and see it as good academic training. So I think that if you aggregate all those individual experiences then you end up with a body of assumption that's very positive about A-levels. (S)

The government might have had various motivations behind such active inertia. As Unwin and Wellington (2001) suggest, the political and educational landscape is always changing and each government aims to put its own stamp on education. Yet each government is relatively short term and always focused on the future. Perhaps they did not want to risk destabilising a system, which determines the future of hundreds of thousands of learners each year. Perhaps they were protecting the privilege that served them well in their lives and enabled them to

advance to a position of authority to influence issues such as this. Or perhaps they were afraid of losing public support, if they were to do something to significantly revise the system that has been defended for years as the gold standard. The following section will examine how my findings are related to a wider context of policy making where different influences within economic, political and ideological domains contribute to the complexity of conducting major educational reform.

8.1.1 Contextualising the findings in policy making spheres

As noted in Chapter two, policy is not created and implemented purely by policy makers, but is influenced by other agencies whose interests it may serve. I have noted how Ball (1990) considers education policy to be a result of complex relationships and contradictions in economic, political and ideological spheres, where it is impossible to separate the influence of one over the other. A-levels and my findings about the reasons for their resistance to change are clearly embedded in each of these spheres. In the following few paragraphs, I will refer to each separately in relation to my findings.

In the economic sphere, I would argue that each of the reasons for A-level's resistance to change that my findings highlighted, is relevant. Comparability of standards is necessary to ensure that the results are presented as evidence of continuing development of educated learners. These learners are a future UK labour force that may contribute to the country's economic competitiveness and economic development. As previously mentioned, educational policy making is based on a belief that the aim of education is to facilitate future employability, thereby encouraging the knowledge-based economy. One school representative suggested:

I think also it is a function of neurosis we have in this country, and I just don't know whether it is true of other countries, that we are always fighting against an erosion of educational standards, that this is somehow relentless negative process, and that somehow the A-level from 1953 or 1965 were a model of intellectual challenge which nowadays kids, who can't concentrate for even 4 minutes on a TV programme, are not up to! And the idea that if this is allowed to continue we will slip to 6th place in economic league table or whatever it is. I do think that this notion of a gold standard is partly to do with the tendency to assess the effectiveness of the education system according to the extent to which it contributes to economic productivity or feeds into economic productivity. Which for me, as

an old-fashioned liberal is very limited way of looking into the value of education.

In addition, the perceived value of A-levels, strengthening their resistance to change, is that as an academic qualification it is more likely to lead to a place at university, hence increasing the chances of a job at the top end of market in the future. As one of my school representatives said:

I think the vast majority of students do A-levels in order to go to university, or otherwise they don't bother. Degree will get them a good job, and that seems to be the main purpose of post-16 education. Sad really, but the financial gain is the ultimate aim and measure of your success. Even if things change now, with the recession and everything, it will only be short term, and it will revert to being money oriented as soon as the economy recovers.

However, vocational qualifications do not seem to carry such promise, as many jobs which rely on the vocational qualification route are paid substantially less. If we then accept this lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes' 'promise' of lucrative future employability, is there not then even more reason to insist on a clear fitness for purpose for our main post-16 qualification? One of my HE representatives summarised it quite well:

I think that given the fact that advance education is so common, anyone going into a workplace without it would struggle. There is a competition for everything and you need those pieces of paper that prove that you are capable of doing something... Especially now with the recession. I think there are social issues too, we are getting to a stage now with EU and free movement of people, and we get highly skilled people here, so competition for jobs is even more difficult. But variety of qualifications to meet various needs of population and economy is important. A-levels are not for everyone.

The reality is that the nature of the existing labour market is such that certain professions and roles at the top end of market will always be more remunerative than many of the vocational jobs. Therefore what may be needed, as Pring et al (2009) suggest, is not just yet another educational reform. Rather what may be required is an understanding of the relationship between educational reform, the labour market and policy making. It is not enough to just reform education, if the market continues to favour certain type of qualifications over the others, unless inequalities in the remuneration of different types of professions are made less stark. Nor should it be the case that the only purpose of education is to prepare the learner for a job, something Pring et al (2009) have raised in their question of

what an educated 14-19 year-old should be. I will return to the question of the purpose of education later in this chapter. It is however clear that this economic imperative has strongly influenced A-levels resistance to change through the combination of the above mentioned factors.

In the political sphere, my findings are possibly most relevant. Different groups will have different interests in their relationship to A-levels, and in their resistance, or otherwise, to changes to the system. These groups, or stakeholders, range from schools, teachers, universities, employees, parents, learners and ultimately, as already discussed, those concerned with the economic health of the country. Each of these stakeholders may be concerned with a different aspect of A-levels and have a vested interest in preserving, or not, the current system. This complex matrix of stakeholders with different and fluctuating levels of power, influence and interest, may be one of the explanations of why A-levels have proved so resilient to major change in the past. Lumby and Foskett (2007) agree that one of the reasons there was so little fundamental change in 14-19 education as a whole is because this area is a field of conflict. Groups have different needs and interests that are not easily solvable and that may often be oppose one another, with the same evidence often supporting different points of view.

Raffe et al (2007) also discuss the political barrier to a unified curriculum and qualifications framework and suggest that many stakeholders may feel their interests are threatened by change. As a result they will use their power to resist it. For example, universities may resist any changes that question the value or prestige of an academic education, for which A-levels have traditionally been seen as a preoperational study and which they may consider is A-levels' main purpose. At the same time, universities would want to be reassured that A-levels are as challenging as they have always been, that standards are comparable over time and across subjects and that the overall program of A-Levels enables effective measurement of a learner's capacity to achieve in Higher Education. As a result, universities may use their power to protect the current system that serves their interests well. A couple of my respondents mentioned HE as an example:

To a huge extent, HEs are the ones who are holding tight to A-levels, because they are too lazy or too afraid to take a risk and do otherwise. (R)

I mean if you want to do reform of A-levels, you can do all sorts of things, you can add more coursework, you can change the grading scale, but the trouble is that they fit into a social educational context where big drivers are the HEIs, and HEIs want to have a selection mechanism so whatever you put in its place is going to have the same constraints as A-levels. (GA)

Therefore all three reasons for A-levels resistance to change (comparability of standards, parity of esteem, and fitness for purpose) are important, to a different extent, to every stakeholder and would need to be addressed by any new policy in order to substantially change the existing system.

It is also possible that government is reluctant to make any major decision on A-levels without the full support of those stakeholders that hold certain power in the decision making process. Since the interests of different stakeholders may often be opposite to each others, this may explain why it is sometimes easier to maintain the status quo in general and opt for partial changes to the system instead. As Ball (1990) writes:

Furthermore, aside from the organic intellectuals of conservatism (the New Right) and the needs of the economy, the practical politics of education must also attend to the pragmatics of control and the limits and possibilities of change in the system. The interests and concerns and progressive impetus of the educational establishment can only be ignored to a certain extent if co-operation is also required from them in making change work. (p.213)

The importance of obtaining co-operation from as many stakeholders as possible in order to reform the system that is complex, high-risk, and well-established is discussed further later on.

Finally, my findings can also be contextualised within an ideological sphere. The dominant culture, the one prevalent in policy-making classes and middle-class parents hopes, is that post-16 education is about preparing for higher education and professional occupations. For them, the issue of standards, and the notion of the 'gold standard' label that no vocational qualification is yet to emulate, may be of great importance as a benchmark of aspiration that will ensure that today's generation is on the right path. For example,

I think there is a lot of political baggage on A-levels, Margaret Thatcher dragged up the gold standard phrase, and I think any Minister of Education who tried to get rid of A-levels would be really

castigated by a lot of middle class parents. They think if it was good enough for them, it must be good enough for their children. And we get a lot of very vocal middle class parents... (HE)

Margaret was the one who said 'we will defend this against all comers', I mean she had the ability to articulate what a lot of people at that time thought and I think it is a very much a middle class issue, they want their kids to follow in their footsteps. (GA)

However, this raises the question of whose standards should form the dominant culture and why. Whose values are implicit in the idea that a 'gold standard' is necessary or indeed that only professional occupations should aspired to it? If it is the core cadre of middle class parents, why are their values being foisted on many others? These are the questions that need further examination and were outside the scope of my study. In practical terms, the existence of A-level's long run standards data – even if not always deemed valid – may add certain credibility to the perception of the qualification. And it is this perception of their recorded longevity and success that maybe becomes a value in itself, and that may contribute to their endurance.

A-levels are also, arguably, a way of emphasising certain values that favour the academic route over the vocational. For as long as there are paths, there will be differences. No parity of esteem has ever materialised. So far the attempts to create stronger links between universities and vocational programmes have not been very successful, with weak policy initiatives and too late interventions (Hoelscher et al, 2008). Overall, A-levels are no longer perceived as serving a specific educational purpose in themselves, but instead are delivered as a means to an end: entry to university. The major weakness of this perception is the assumption that all A-level learners will, or should, go into higher education (De Waal, 2009). Therefore both the lack of any shift towards a parity of esteem and the now confused purpose of A-levels adds to the complexity of trying to change the system that has so far proved so elusive to radical reforms. The values and views of the dominant culture should be addressed in the context of each of these factors in order to contribute to future educational reforms.

Having examined how the findings of my study relate to the matrix of policy making influences, I will now turn to some recommendations for the future based on this work.

8.1.2 The starting points for the future

Since May 2010 there is a new coalition government and there is no general election due until 2015. The review of A-levels has long been promised, and is theoretically due in 2013, but so far there have been no concrete moves towards setting up the review. The Schools White Paper (DfE, 2011) is promising the review of vocational qualifications based on the Wolf report (2011). However, so far there are no major proposed changes being made in relation to A-levels. Potential changes to A-levels are being mooted, based on the Sykes Report (2009). This may involve reducing the number of A-level subjects available, which will reduce the choice and flexibility for learners in an attempt to combat the criticism regarding 'soft A-level subjects'. The policy work on 14-19 Diplomas has stopped. It is still too early to say whether the new government will be effective in either facilitating a review or reformation of A-levels. However, there is certainly a feeling of backtracking on the vague promises made whilst the Conservatives were in opposition. It is reminiscent of the various power theories (e.g. Bourdieu) in which those who were opposing the system whilst on the outside, assimilate very quickly to the pragmatism of the way the things are done once they are inside.

Because pragmatism may be what every government champions, there are always short-term policy changes in order to prove they are dealing with issues that they have inherited from the previous government. However, in reality they appear to only ever be interested in quick wins that will be beneficial to them during the next election. Lumby and Foskett (2007) write about these smaller, incremental changes, a form of limited reform that replaces more radical change. The smaller changes only add to the already complex system, as one of my GA's pointed out

The choice of qualifications is very complex for schools too, and that is because of the partial reform. And we can see it time and again, the English system never reforms itself fully just partially, to use a political term it is a passive transformism – attempted reform without popular involvement, so the old continues but new is added on to it. It is a classical strategy of the ruling block to make the system adaptable but what it does is that when new is added to the old, it forms a dialectical relation to it and is dominated by old but it increasingly adds complexity to the system.

Therefore we will have to wait to see what, if anything, will be done to disturb the long-lived status quo of A-levels.

My research has emphasised that it is one thing to try to understand how things work and what problems might arise, but a completely another matter to actually try to solve these problems. As Mansell (2007) suggests, the final refuge for the defenders of the results' culture so dominant in the English education system is 'to allege, like Margaret Thatcher, that there is no alternative' (p.244). A-levels may be far from perfect, but my respondents agree with the general belief that they are certainly the best we currently have. My analysis shows that there is no current alternative that would not require the complete overhaul of the whole system to remove the reliance on A-Levels. Beyond this simple challenge of the lack of options available, according to Ofqual's surveys, there is also insufficient public support for revision to justify such a change. The IB is the only qualification system that is providing a viable challenge to A-Levels. However, it is very expensive and not well suited to being delivered on the scale reflected by the current A-level programme. Furthermore, the emphasis on A-level standards, and the seriousness with which results are treated, makes it unlikely that internally marked assessments will return, with teachers' professionalism accepted as an authority on learners' performance. So even if there is an agreement that there are issues with A-levels as they are today, there seems to be no path to a better future without them - unless a major reform takes place.

There are many who continue to fight for a change of the system, for a more unified curriculum and qualifications framework. The Nuffield Review has long suggested that an individual qualification approach should be replaced with a multi-level Baccalaureate Framework thus providing more breadth and space for innovative learning (NR, 2008). Hodgson and Spours (2011) note that given the amount of knowledge competing to enter the curriculum, there is a challenge in reconciling choice and the importance of certain areas of knowledge as well as having recognition of different forms of learning. The supporters of an English Bac argue that by building on the strengths of the IB, BTEC, Diplomas, and individual subjects, with a balance of theory and knowledge through applied learning and skill development, a new framework would best contribute to a comprehensive education for every learner (Pring et al, 2009). Raffe et al (2007) describe Higher Still, the high-status Scottish qualification, as an example that a successful unified framework is achievable. However, researchers warn that a unified framework

should have realistic aims as no reform of curriculum and qualifications can radically transform the rules of positional competition. Nor can it achieve full parity of esteem.

Ball (2008) argues that for a reform to succeed, it is not enough to change the way things are currently done. It needs to change everything root and branch: teachers, schools, learning and education's relationship to international economic competitiveness. It requires a wholesale 're-imagining' of education. This is where the discourse breaks, in a collective failure to re-imagine education where it is not about pure preparation for employment, or about ensuring the successful economic productivity of the country. It is, rather, that it should be about the right of all learners to receive the best education they can in order to fully enjoy a democratic future in which they are willing and capable of choosing the vocation that is best suited to their interests and abilities. This utopian vision of education is not pragmatic. However, it may go a long way towards explaining why we get so passionate when we talk about education.

Better collaboration amongst all stakeholders is a start. Pring et al (2009) call for a national policy steer towards collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, HE, and employers. They also suggest that social partners such as policy-makers, teachers, learners, parents, end-users and researchers should assist in shaping the policy not just implementing it. Hodgson and Spours (2011) agree. They suggest that an environment in which professionals and other social partners can debate and discuss difficult and challenging issues is a way towards change. The policy process needs to be reviewed, as well as how the economic, political and ideological spheres of influence mentioned in a previous section are related to it. It should be more transparent and reflective, a process when policy impact assessments come before policy is made, not after (Krstic Anderson, 2008). There should also be a stronger sense of policy learning (Raffe and Spours, 2007), so that lessons from the past are learned and issues identified are considered by those who are involved in the implementation of policy.

The future may be uncertain, and none of the reasons for A-levels resistance to change are likely to be resolved soon. The importance of standards and debate about them is not going to go away. The gap between the perceived value of academic and vocational education may continue to get greater and the upper

secondary phase of education become more polarised (Hodgson and Spours, 2011). Post-16 education is likely to remain fragmented, with A-levels trying to fulfil different demands placed on it. However, one positive thing that may result from the current economic recession, and having fewer public funds available, is that there may be less focus on pursuing the link between skills and the economy (Keep, 2011). Through better collaboration, there may be a way to overcome political barriers. Because of increased university tuition fees, the dominant class may start to appreciate alternative values to simply those that lead to a place at university. Working together, perhaps the focus can move back to educating future generations in an environment that celebrates different kinds of achievement.

8.2 Reflection on the study

Decisions made about the design of the study may have led to some limitations, not all of which I could have foreseen at the outset. This study required familiarity with a range of methods and theoretical perspectives, of which I had varying experience. I needed to choose the methods that would allow the most valid results to emerge. In order to fully engage with participants' views and to keep my findings fully based on their perspective, I have removed the quantitative data that I originally included and have focused purely on an explorative qualitative approach. This required me to engage with the data in a new way, which enabled me to learn more about qualitative methods. Conducting a study based on a quantitative approach may have provided a different perspective. However, I believe it would have missed out on the depth of the views from respondents about this topic.

Engaging with, and reflecting on, the literature has also proved challenging. Because of the clear word limits of EdD thesis, I needed my literature focus to be as concise and as up to date as possible. This could have resulted in over-reliance on recent reports written during the Labour government, some of which were commissioned by right-wing think tanks and the Conservative party, as quite a few of them were focused on A-levels (e.g. Bassett et al (2009); Sykes Report (2009)). However, in order to reduce this bias, I have engaged critically with the sources that are quoted in this thesis and sought to support them with objective academic sources where relevant. I have found the topic to be fascinating, particularly in the wider 14-19 curriculum and qualifications area. I hope to continue with a systemic

review of historic literature on A-levels and investigate further how opinion on them relates to the changing political landscape.

Another possible limitation of this study may be the representativeness of the sample. The scope of my research was not aiming to be a fully representative and generalisable study but to link in with my own professional context. My focus was on only a few key roles that I was interested in. My study is based on the views of a very specific group of people, those with a professional experience of A-levels. As previously mentioned, the sample ended up being of a particular 'type' (white, mostly male, middle-class, educated professionals). They have given me rich data that represents their personal and professional response, likely to be a strongly held core view and one that may get to the heart of the no change decisions. However, any further study would do well to try to increase the variety of sample, or focus specifically on a different 'type' – for example, vocational teachers or drawing on the experience of learners who did not do A-levels, or even those who did but then studied at an HEI in another country. It would be interesting to compare the views on this topic of different samples, to better understand the experiences and thoughts of different professionals.

There are several ways in which findings from this study could be extrapolated. One way would be through conducting a systemic review of other research on this topic. Already there are several surveys conducted by various organisations that can be brought together and analysed (QCDA, Nuffield Review, UCAS). A larger sample of universities should also be included for their views. At the moment, there is data from only a few selective universities regarding their thoughts on A-levels. A wider approach would be extremely beneficial. In addition, the findings of this study could be further disseminated through a summary report. Research summary reports were part of the usual evidence based practice at the QCDA. They enabled decision makers to reflect on the research regarding programmes under exploration. As part of this study dissemination, I plan to communicate my findings widely, as well as to share it with the participants of the study.

I am hoping that the findings of this study will contribute to the future debate on A-levels, because there is a sufficient amount of interesting conclusions to demonstrate the value achieved by my approach. It would be useful to follow it up with further research if the anticipated review in 2013 takes place. The follow up should include additional external stakeholders such as teachers, employers,

learners and parents. Another interesting study would be to assess the impact of 14-19 reforms on teachers' workload and schools, as they usually have to deal with the sharp end of implementation of changes. I remember talking to one teacher when the 14-19 Diplomas were being implemented. She complained about the timetabling issue. There were now so many different units to be examined (and theoretically, under the choice and flexibility policy, the number of potential different exams is huge), that the simplest logistical issues, such as having enough exam rooms, having enough invigilators, were becoming difficult to manage. I think understanding this reality, away from the policy-making offices, would be of great importance.

At the beginning of this thesis, I presented three rationales for doing this research. The first one was related to my own professional interest in A-levels – I believe that I have fully met this objective. I not only understand A-levels better, but I also understand better how we have ended up with such a complex system, nearly sixty years after A-levels were first introduced. As an outsider to the A-level system, I never fully engaged with the significance these qualifications hold in the English psyche. I understand now a 'little Englander' attitude towards A-levels, which indicates the importance of cultural context in the development of education policy. As mentioned by one respondent in a sarcastic, but possibly semi-serious, tone:

..we would never replace A-levels ... that would be appalling because we are British!! (GA)

Secondly, as now a former QCDA employee, I was interested in A-levels from the point of view of someone who was often asked to provide evidence related to relevant issues with them. Even though A-levels are no longer relevant to my work, I would certainly find it challenging if I am ever asked again to simply provide a statistical analysis on A-levels without including several disclaimers in my report (for example, in terms of questioning if we are comparing like with like). A strong will is required to resist the urge of writing to the newspapers next August to challenge their inevitable comments on the declining standards of A-levels! My findings will still be shared with Ofqual, as they in their function of being the regulator of A-levels, who often deal with complaints from the public, may be interested.

Thirdly, I was concerned with the place this study would have within the wider educational context. I hope that there is a value in the findings of this study that may contribute to the future research and debates on A-levels and in particular to the formal review in 2013 - should it take place. For example, my study could benefit our professional understanding of post-16 academic education, because it clearly demonstrates that there are three issues that should be addressed. These are:

1. the value of comparability of standards when their validity is so questionable,
2. an open discussion on parity of esteem and how vocational education can be given the kudos that it undoubtedly deserves, and most importantly
3. clarifying the purpose of post-16 secondary education.

These findings deserve to be examined by the educational and policy making community. I will share my findings with others and will follow closely any future developments in this area.

Finally, this study was a good learning process for me. It is important that I accept my professional responsibility for both the content and the methods of the study. The dissemination of the findings will be another interesting stage in the process and one that will take time and effort. However, at the end, the success of the study will be judged on how much it informs future research, practice and policies on A-levels. Data collected through the study is of immense interest to me. I hope to analyse it further, as I feel that there is so much more insightful information that could be gained from it, perhaps unrelated to the topic of this research. I also hope to revisit this topic in a few years time, after the new government has had a chance to put its stamp on A-levels, and after any changes may have been made.

8.3 Concluding remarks

Two and a half years after beginning this study with the aim of trying to understand what is it about A-levels that makes them so resilient to change and helps them to survive when so many other qualifications have come and gone (such as GNVQs), I have now reached the end of the journey. There have been some surprises on the way. A-levels are regularly declared as representing the gold standard without anyone truly knowing who coined this phrase. There was a clear dislike of the name baccalaureate in my research because it is obviously not English. Another

surprise was the way many still like and respect A-levels despite the weight of annual negative publicity each time the results are published.

I am reminded of the way we talk about our relatives with fond criticism. However, should anyone from the outside try to join in, we would become their biggest and most loyal defenders. There was a genuine support for the A-level system from nearly all of the respondents, albeit with an acknowledged respect for the IB, and despite the perception that the standards are declining. The reasoning for support varied, from knowing the background work that goes into ensuring that A-level rigour is upheld, to the simple fact that, despite the many complaints, the system still works and the nation is still managing to produce good quality learners who go on to do well at university.

There was also an openness to another way. Respondents acknowledged that the market was already awash with alternatives such as the IB, the Pre-U, and the AQA-Bac. They talked about how many, especially private, schools are keen to add to their learner's portfolio by encouraging their learners to have a fourth AS level, or some extra curricular activity. In particular, there was a strong support from nearly all respondent for an extended project. This would all indicate that there is a hunger for a more diverse curriculum, for additional dimensions to the standard three A-levels. This could be a good start for policy-makers to consider as it may permit an evolutionary approach to policy change in an environment where revolution is deemed unsuitable.

Unless there is serious and wholesale societal change, things are likely to continue as they are. Future reforms will modify the system at the edges, but are unlikely to change it completely. Government continues to be involved in education because of the perceived importance of education to the economy and the international competitiveness of the country, although this linkage may become less prevalent now that the country is facing bigger economic issues. The consequence of having a highly politicised educational system is that decisions tend to be focused on the short-term, linked with the remaining length of that government's period in office. This results in an environment where such changes are often rushed and in the face of resistance and caution from the major stakeholders and agents of implementation.

There is clearly a tension between political will and political pragmatism when it comes to making a decision on A-levels and so far political pragmatism seems to be winning. This may be due to fear of losing votes, or it may be about the vested interest various influential stakeholders wield over government policy. Perhaps it is a mixture of both. The self-interest and the desire to be re-elected may inform policy decisions. What is needed is for all stakeholders to continue to discuss, question and debate what we want from our qualifications, curriculum and education overall. The government should use these discussions to inform their policies and perhaps be prepared to take a risk. Different stakeholders have different interests and different influences, but what is needed is a system tailored to assist learners to achieve what they need, and to some extent want, to the best of their abilities. Education may not change everything, the differences and inequalities in a society will always exist, but what it could, and should do, is provide a real opportunity for everyone willing to take it. In order for this to happen, collaboration and co-operation is necessary on everyone's behalf, with perhaps a little less resistance to change.

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Appendix 1 – Interview schedule

1. Did you do A-levels or teach/ work in the area?
2. How long do you think A-levels have been around?
3. What do you think are the advantages of A-levels?
4. What do you think are the disadvantages of A-levels?
5. Should A-levels be replaced? If so, with what?
6. Why has it not been done after the Tomlinson review?
7. What do A-levels mean politically and culturally?
8. What do you think is the future for A-levels? Will we still have them in 2050?
9. Where does the expression 'gold standard' come from?
10. Do you have more or less confidence in A-levels today?

Appendix 2 – An extract from one interview

Have you done A-levels yourself?

Yes. Actually before we start, let me give you some background data that I have produced as I think it is very useful. As you know, for many years, A-levels were the standard, although I wouldn't call it a gold standard myself, and what it is showing here is numbers for maths, physics, biology and chemistry over 20 year period. Interestingly as soon as they have started asking for As levels maths, a lot of people did AS level maths, got bad grades and just dropped. And it is only now that we are getting up to the numbers of maths A-levels that we had 20 years ago. It took us that long to recover from AS introduction. So that is the starting point. And physics and chemistry are both gradually dropping down, there is a slight rise here, but they are both declining over this period of time. Biology has become more popular. So basically when they introduced AS level each exam board was asked to do 3 higher sixth modules, and 3 lower sixth modules, and they were told the higher sixth modules had to be the same standard as the old A-level. So most students started off in their lower sixth, taking about 2 and ½ modules at the lower sixth, and they found they did badly in it. So they ended up dropping them. That makes sense, it is a dramatic drop, but following on from that, it is now picking up so what's happen then is that the percentage getting an A grade has massively increased at the same time!! So the maths examining boards said, oh we must give more A grades. And that is a reverse effect to AS introduction. So schools are now saying, ok you do an A-level maths, you get A grade, up to 46 per cent last year. So what's causing us a lot of grief, is a combination of increasing number doing A-level maths, and increasing proportion of those getting an A, so you multiply these together and you have numbers getting an A grade going up and up and up. Last year it went up by 8 per cent! So what is happening now, especially in the last 2 years, that our university is 8 per cent over the number of students planned on recruiting, and we used to get our targets right. I would expect that for my target of 150 students, I would get 140 and the other 10 would be spare space. I would then look on those that were marginal and adjust the offers. Now in the last two years, I have been about 20 places over my 150 target places. And I am turning people away. My statistics now show that all my students got three grade A! So I think QCA needs to tighten up on the exam pass rate and it is why I have been asking for A* in maths. We need A* because we have no alternative, it is an

only way of getting it under control. We can't afford to wait while people 'evaluate it'. So this is the driving data behind it.

Have you noticed a difference in the quality of students now compared to 10 years ago?

Oh absolutely. I mean the maths in particular, you look at the syllabus and superficially they look the same. But if you actually look at the style of the questions, 20 years ago it was 'here is a maths problem, you solve it' and now it is more 'do this, do this and do that – aren't you clever, you solved it! It is testing the mechanism but it is not testing the understanding or the strategy of problem solving at all. And that has an effect on how well they do at the university. We used to have standard engineering degrees which for 3 years for a bachelor degree and 4 years for a few high flyers who would go on to get a masters. And in last 10 years, what has happened is that increasingly more of our 1st year is now concerned with remedial maths in order to bring people to the same level as they would have been under the old A-level system (because they have been dropping it) and at the same time we have been taking more of the IB students who don't do applied maths because we now have remedial maths course. So now everyone comes in, we say 'welcome to the university and sit down and do maths test'! And roughly 50 students need remedial maths course. We can cope with it but shouldn't have to, and it proves that the standard of math has dropped. When I did my degree course, pure maths and standard maths were required in order to enter engineering course, but given the number of schools that cannot teach double maths, we had, in the last 20 years or so, to accept more and more students who only have single maths. This means that the maths skills are worse than they were. And as a result, even the bachelor course is now 4 years. The first year is now a foundation year, doing the job that A-levels used to do. I mean kids are working hard, I cannot say they are not, but they are not using their brains in the same way that others have 20 years ago. And that is really what that article in the Times last week was saying.

So why do you think the standard has changed?

I think, some years ago somebody told me and I can't now trace the reference, but he said that the number of qualified maths teachers in schools (the ones with a maths degree) has dropped by 50 per cent over 20 years. And that is a starting

point, that the schools in the state sector don't have qualified maths teachers. This is a slippery slope. I believe that few years ago, in the teachers training colleges, they were only about 6 people on the teacher training course who wanted to teach physics! So there is a great drop in the number of graduates going back to schools to teach these subjects. And we are seeing the results of this now! Now to put it into perspective for our university, about third of our students come from the outside of the UK. And in particular, a lot of our students are coming from Singapore and Malaysia where they are still doing traditional 4 A-levels, really bright students, all getting 3-4 A grades and they show the quality difference. And I have recently visited schools in Singapore, and I know they are employing really professional teachers, they are 40-50 years old and they are determined to teach maths properly! And they do, and students learn it inside out. I mean I am a bit worried when I see some of the international comparison tests, from my perspective the reality doesn't tie up with what these results are saying – I mean we are 15th or something in the world and I just don't believe that seeing the decline in the UK standards and seeing the standard in Singapore and Malaysia. It does of course depend on what sort of measure they use, I realise we are only seeing the headlines but still.

When I first started doing this job, I was less than enthusiastic about the IB, because even though they have high level maths it was only a single maths and it was one of the 6 subjects they did. However, over the years that standard has basically remained the same, and so now I would very happily accept those with IB and I always ask for 6s and 7s in maths and that is usually 7-8 per cent, which seems right. But if everyone was to do IB I might have to review that or if the numbers of good students had gone up, but in the meanwhile, I am comfortable with it.

So overall, I can say we have developed a copying strategy, but a longer term concerns I am having for A-levels are there, as what it says to me now is that statisticians who are making the grade boundaries for A-levels don't understand the statistics! If 46 per cent get a grade A, then you are totally abusing the scoring system.