

**Higher Education, *Curriculum 2000* and the Future Reform of 14-  
19 Qualifications in England**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article, which is based on research funded by the Nuffield Foundation, examines the responses of higher education institutions (HEIs) to the recent reform of advanced level qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, known as Curriculum 2000. The research, undertaken in late 2002 and early 2003 following the 'graduation' of the first cohort of Curriculum 2000 learners, combined documentary analysis, use of national survey findings and interviews with a sample of university admissions tutors from new (post-1992) and old (pre-1992) universities in England. The research shows that HEIs were generally well-informed about most aspects of the advanced level reforms and, at the level of public statements, welcomed the possibility of a broader advanced level curriculum. However, this relatively positive approach was not reproduced in terms of offer-making to candidates: admissions tutors, particularly in the pre-1992 universities, continued to make offers largely on the basis of predicted grades in three main A Levels. We argue that the reason for this cautious approach by the HEIs was not simply a result of their traditional support for subject specialisation, but also stemmed from systemic problems related to the Curriculum 2000 qualifications, their voluntarism and their less than universal up-take by schools, colleges and learners. We conclude by looking briefly at the implications of these research findings for the future reform of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications in England.*

## **Higher education, expansion and advanced level qualifications**

Since the introduction of A Levels in the early 1950s, these qualifications have been seen as the primary means of entry into higher education in England. Although many higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly accepted more recent qualifications, such as the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), as a way of gaining access onto some higher education courses, these newer awards have not been universally recognised in the way that A Levels have been (FEDA/IOE/Nuffield Foundation 1997). This is partly because from 1950-2000 any new advanced level qualifications were introduced alongside A Levels and were thus normally seen by HE admissions tutors as additions to these traditional awards. Their credibility was based upon a comparison with the A Level and they were judged in relation to it.

Nevertheless, the relationship between HEI admission and advanced level qualifications has not remained unchanged. Over the past twenty years, two change processes have gone hand-in-hand. Participation in both higher education and upper secondary education has expanded significantly. At the same time, a divided academic and vocational qualifications system has itself changed to respond to new patterns of participation in upper secondary education in England (Hodgson and Spours 2003). As a result, A Levels have gradually evolved. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of modular A Level syllabuses were introduced and A Levels became available in a wider range of subjects, many of them applied (Young and Leney 1997). Alongside these developments, new full-time vocational qualifications were introduced - in the 1980s the BTEC National Diploma and in the 1990s the Advanced GNVQ. The latter was specifically designed with progression to higher education in mind (DFE/ED/WO 1991).

However, student patterns of study at advanced level did not change significantly. The majority of advanced level learners continued to take three or fewer A Levels up until the introduction of the advanced level qualification reforms in September 2000 (Spours *et al.* 2000). Despite constant debates about broadening the advanced level curriculum and limited reform attempts, such as the introduction of the Advanced Supplementary qualification, there were no national requirements for broader patterns of study and higher education continued to focus on requirements for depth rather than breadth of study (Peterson 1988, Kingdon 1991). What emerged was an advanced level curriculum which, while flexible and meeting the subject depth requirements of three-year single-subject honours degrees, was deemed to be very narrow in comparison to our European counterparts (Green and Steedman 1993, DfEE/DENI/WO 1997, DfES 2003). Moreover, an influential report in the early 1990s (Audit Commission/Ofsted 1993) pointed out the wasteful nature of a divided post-16 qualifications system in which many learners chose to study A Levels with little chance of successful completion. This theme of inefficiency in post-compulsory education was echoed in the Dearing Report in the mid 1990s (Dearing 1996).

In the marketised climate that followed the Further and Higher Education Act (DfE 1992), the relationship between advanced level qualifications and HEIs in England was not particularly problematical because this divided and flexible upper secondary qualifications system allowed different types of higher education providers both to recruit and to select. Those universities and departments that had a surplus of places compared with demand, what might be termed 'recruiters', could accept applications with two or fewer A Levels. On the other hand, those universities and departments which enjoyed a surplus of applicants for places and might be termed 'selectors' could demand more A Levels at particular grades and in specific subjects. This relationship between

entry to higher education and advanced level qualifications in England could thus be described as one of mutual convenience based as it was on a voluntarist relationship in which neither learners, upper secondary providers nor universities were bound by the type of matriculation requirements that pertain in the majority of other countries.

In the late 1990s, proposals for the reform of advanced level qualifications (DfEE/DENI/ WO 1997), to become known as *Curriculum 2000*, attempted in two important senses to break with this tradition. First, in September 2000, new advanced level qualifications were introduced to replace all traditional awards for 16-19 year olds, including A Levels. *Curriculum 2000* was thus more than the introduction of a single additional qualification, as had happened in the past. Second, the Government set out expectations (Blackstone 1998) and guidance (QCA 1999) for how providers and learners should respond to the new qualifications which only partially went against the grain of the voluntarist tradition. While there was not an absolute requirement for learners to broaden their advanced level study programmes (such as in a baccalaureate-style award), there was an underlying expectation that learners would take more advanced level subjects and a Key Skill Qualification and that some of them would mix academic and vocational study. The Government envisaged that a combination of factors - education professional support for the reforms, competition between providers to attract 'good' learners, funding incentives in further education and the UCAS Tariff for university admission (which gave points for different types of qualifications) - would be sufficient to secure the broadening of the advanced level curriculum (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

With the introduction of *Curriculum 2000* HEIs were suddenly faced with a new set of advanced level qualifications, including a revised A Level, and with the real possibility of learners applying to them having taken new types of study programmes. HEIs thus had

to make sense of this new and more complicated context and to rethink their admissions policies and requirements.

This article uses evidence from an Institute of Education/Nuffield Foundation Research Project on *Curriculum 2000* to examine how HEIs responded to these new qualifications and what effect their actions had on the reform process. What our research demonstrates is that in a market-led and voluntarist environment, in which learners, schools, colleges and HEIs were exhorted to change but were not bound by a tangible sense of common agreements, all parties tended to act in their own interests. We will argue that the overall cautious response of universities to the new programmes of study under *Curriculum 2000* was not simply a continuation of a traditional reluctance to recognise breadth of study, but more a 'rational actor' response to the uncertainties of what was largely a voluntarist reform. As we shall see, the ways in which the sectional interests of HEIs played out in the case of *Curriculum 2000* limited the impact of the reforms, in particular in relation to broadening the advanced level curriculum. A study of the dynamics of these relationships may, therefore, hold valuable lessons for future reform as the Government once again seeks to broaden study at advanced level, this time by means of a 14-19 diploma system (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004). In the conclusion to this article, we suggest two policy lessons for further reform of curriculum and qualifications so that HEIs, continuing to behave as rational actors, feel more able to support rather than to pay lip service to the proposed new diplomas.

## **Researching higher education and *Curriculum 2000***

The *Curriculum 2000* reforms, introduced from September 2000, were designed to encourage the offer of broader packages of qualifications at advanced level with learners typically studying more subjects and being able to mix general and vocational qualifications within a single programme. This involved splitting the old A Level into two modular parts - the AS (Advanced Subsidiary) normally taken in the first year of study and the higher level A2 taken in the second year which together made up the full A Level. There was an expectation by government that learners would take at least four AS subjects (Blackstone 1998). Broad advanced level vocational qualifications, Advanced GNVQs, were refashioned into Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs) which were structurally aligned with the new AS/A2 qualifications to encourage mixed study programmes. A Key Skills Qualification in Communication, Application of Number and IT was introduced and was intended to be taken by all advanced level learners alongside the AS/A2s and AVCEs. Finally, a higher level award, the Advanced Extension Award, was introduced in certain subjects to replace HEIs own tests and earlier S Levels. Schools, colleges and learners could choose which qualifications they wished to take and universities continued to be free to set their own entry requirements. As we have mentioned earlier, this approach to the reforms could be described as 'voluntarist' since government did not seek to require a minimum programme of study for learners or stipulate a minimum matriculation requirement for university entrance.

The Institute of Education (IOE)/Nuffield Foundation Research Project on *Curriculum 2000* (1999-2003) initially focused on schools' and colleges' responses to these reforms in their planning and early implementation phases, drawing on 50 case-study institutions and a number of surveys conducted by national government agencies and teacher

professional organisations.<sup>1</sup> The research was designed to establish what kind of curriculum was being offered in the wake of the reforms, what programmes learners were choosing to follow and what factors were affecting both institutional and individual learner decision-making. During the period 1999-2001 it became clear from interviews with school and college staff, and learners themselves, that universities were seen to be having a major influence on teacher and learner decision-making and there was widespread criticism of the way that HEIs appeared to be responding to the new qualifications. In 2002, therefore, we undertook a separate but related study into higher education admissions following the first full cycle of *Curriculum 2000*.

The additional research involved preparatory discussions with national agencies, including the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) together with desk research of data from national surveys undertaken by UCAS, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Learning Skills and Development Agency (LSDA), the DfES and HEI web-sites. This phase of the research led to the identification of key issues affecting the higher education perspective on *Curriculum 2000*, which formed the basis for the main fieldwork.

The fieldwork took the form of visits to a sample of 13 HEIs in England, comprising nine pre-1992 (older) universities, three post-1992 (newer) universities and one college of further and higher education, to seek the views of those responsible for admissions decisions.<sup>2</sup> There was thus a preponderance of pre-1992 universities. This was a conscious decision, recognising the particular influence the attitudes and actions of these selective institutions had had on the perceptions of both teachers and learners in schools and colleges. The 13 institutions chosen included examples across the spectrum in terms of size, geographical location, nature of admissions system, newer



and older universities and those generally regarded as recruiter and selector institutions. Between them, these 13 HEIs received applications from 500,000 prospective undergraduates in 2002, offered over 50,000 places and subsequently admitted over 45,000 learners at the start of the academic year.

A total of 40 interviews were conducted with six senior managers, 15 individuals in central admissions teams (mainly at a senior level), and 21 staff responsible for admissions to a wide range of different departments or faculties. These visits typically involved between two and five separate interviews including, where possible, a senior manager (for example, Pro-Vice Chancellor or Registrar), a senior member of the central admissions team and one or more admissions tutors from a range of different departments. Each institution was asked, in addition, to complete a short questionnaire providing basic information about the admissions procedure and *Curriculum 2000* factors. The visits were carried out in the autumn of 2002 so that views were informed by the experience of the recruitment of the first wave of *Curriculum 2000* learners.

Applying for university in this country is a long drawn out process because of the wide range of courses on offer and the fact that application and offer-making are based on predicted rather than on actual results. It is also complex because different courses and institutions make different requirements of applicants. Universities go through four major stages in the selection process - *advertising* (advertising their courses and entry requirements via their prospectus or web-site); *offer-making* (making individual offers of places based on an assessment of the candidate's application form and, in some cases, on an interview and further tests); *confirmation* (accepting or rejecting candidates when their actual examination results are known); and *Clearing* (accepting individual applicants who have not gained a place during confirmation onto unfilled places). This

four-stage process structured our approach to the research and the way in which it is reported here.

## **The school and college perspective on higher education and *Curriculum 2000***

Before analysing the responses of higher education representatives themselves to the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, it is relevant to summarise briefly the views of staff and learners in the IOE/Nuffield Research Project sites regarding the response of higher education.

For the most part, schools and colleges were critical of the higher education reaction to *Curriculum 2000*. They did not detect any significant changes in universities' admissions criteria or procedures to reflect new patterns of study at advanced level as a result of the reforms. There were accusations that many HEIs were unclear about how they might view the different programmes of study possible under *Curriculum 2000*. This was particularly difficult for schools and colleges at the time when the reforms were first implemented in September 2000 and learners, who intended to apply for higher education, were making decisions about what to study.

In terms of the specific elements contained within the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, schools and colleges detected a far from universal recognition by HEIs of the 'fourth AS subject' and little enthusiasm for the Key Skills Qualification. There were also perceptions of a

differential response by 'selector' and 'recruiter' universities. The so-called 'selector' institutions, which are regarded by schools and colleges as exercising the greatest influence over learners' decisions, were widely seen as being less enthusiastic about the reforms. This evidence from the IOE/Nuffield interviews was reinforced by the results of a UCAS/QCA survey of schools and colleges, carried out in November 2001 (QCA 2002), which suggested that universities were perceived not to be responding positively to the reforms. According to many staff in our research study sites, the emerging higher education response to the reforms was having a significant impact both on the value learners placed on different elements of their studies and on what teachers felt they could advise learners to take.

### **Higher education responses to the reforms**

The additional research undertaken into HEI responses to *Curriculum 2000*, however, paints a more complex picture. In contrast to the perception in schools and colleges described above, most HEIs in our study came across as supportive of the reforms, at least in principle, both in their official publications and in the views expressed by staff during interviews. Many of these institutions included specific statements on *Curriculum 2000* in their prospectuses and/or on their web-sites, and these tended to start with a broad statement of support. The following example, from a prestigious university, is typical:

*"[The University] acknowledges the potential of the revised post-16 curriculum and welcomes too, the increased opportunity for study of a wider range of*

*subjects to a higher level. We welcome the move towards a coherent national framework of academic and vocational qualifications that will more easily provide comparability between qualifications."*

Supportive comments about the underlying direction of change recurred frequently during the interviews. Within this, three aspects of the reforms in particular received a widespread welcome. There was support for the broader programmes of study encouraged by *Curriculum 2000*; for the alignment of vocational and academic subjects and the trend towards greater variety of advanced level study programmes. Many of the interviewees believed that the study of a fourth AS subject encouraged learners to defer specialisation and allowed them to keep their options open.

The more favourable views of the reforms tended to come from senior higher education staff and those working in central admissions departments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a more equivocal reaction from staff in subject departments or faculties. In particular, those recruiting predominantly for single subject honours degree courses were concerned to see evidence of achievement and potential directly relevant to these subjects and were, therefore, wary of changes that might dilute the depth of prior study in these areas. Although not a majority view, the following comment from an admissions tutor in our study reflects this concern about the possible implications for depth of study related to the calibre of candidate:

*"I can see how they [the reforms] might have some benefit for young people of more modest ability or alternatively young people of low academic aspirations who might have been encouraged to take themselves more seriously through these reforms, .... I'm pretty worried about their effect on the upper end of the*

*ability range”.*

Interviewees tended to become more critical as attention shifted from the underlying aims and principles to the initial impact of the reforms in practice. In expressing concerns they recognised that they were often simply reflecting views picked up from contacts in schools and colleges, or from media reports of the various problems associated with the reforms. The main concerns and criticisms voiced were that the implementation of the reforms had been too rushed; there was now too much emphasis on examinations and 'teaching to the test'; and there was confusion about some key features of the new qualifications (e.g. the standard of the AS and the validity of the new Key Skills Qualification).

### **Awareness of the reforms**

Although the evidence from schools and colleges indicated that higher education providers had not always appeared well informed in the early stages of the reforms, by the time of the interviews (Autumn 2002), there was a good awareness of the aims of *Curriculum 2000* and the main elements within it. Central admissions teams were very well informed and had made efforts to brief subject specialists involved in selection. However, other interviewees recognised that they had not been as well prepared. Some admissions staff initially found themselves having to react to enquiries from schools and colleges before they had fully considered the implications of the changes for admissions policies and procedures. Nevertheless, even in these cases, interviewees generally considered that they had been properly geared up for the 2002 recruitment round. Most said they had taken steps to ensure that 'partner' schools and colleges were given an

opportunity to discuss the implications of the reforms for university entrance.

Predictably, the change most widely associated with *Curriculum 2000* was the move towards the study of four subjects as more of a norm in the first year of an advanced level programme. The new UCAS Tariff was also well known, though not always fully understood, particularly by those who had decided not to adopt it<sup>3</sup>. Other changes, such as those affecting AVCEs, the Key Skills Qualification and the new AEs were generally understood by those in the sample, at least in very broad terms. However, the details of these changes were less likely to be well-known, especially where they were seen as having little direct relevance to selection decisions in a particular HEI or subject area.

### **Advertising - changes to admissions criteria**

All the central admissions teams interviewed said that they had reviewed admissions criteria in the light of the *Curriculum 2000* changes. All reflected this in their prospectuses, many with relatively full statements, having sought views from schools and colleges. In terms of actual changes to admissions criteria, HEIs in this sample could be seen as falling somewhere on a spectrum between two extremes. On the one hand, there were those which simply continued to apply their previous procedures within the new framework. For example, offers were still largely based on performance in three main A Level subjects, and these were often quite narrowly specified for particular degree courses. At the other end of the scale, some institutions in the research had made a genuine attempt to reflect the new structure fully. This manifested itself through, for example, moves to embrace the new UCAS Tariff, giving equal weighting to academic and vocational subjects and awarding points from free-standing AS subjects.

Within this range, predominantly 'selector' universities tended to be closer to the former end of the spectrum, whereas 'recruiters' inclined more towards the latter.

Whilst most of the admissions statements from the sample universities were expressed in terms which suggested encouragement for the new advanced level reforms, there was much less evidence that this was the case with admissions decisions. For example, there was little evidence of a fourth AS subject being required and there were virtually no cases where academic/vocational combinations or the Key Skills Qualification were required. At best, these aspects were "encouraged" or "taken into account" by some institutions. The following extracts from a statement on a university web-site are typical of many:

*"AS Levels, whether GCE or VCE are encouraged but not compulsory. If you have taken a fourth AS level and had it certificated, then we will take it into account when deciding on the conditions of an offer we might make you....."*

*"Key Skills qualifications do not form a compulsory element of our general entry requirement and will not normally form part of the conditions of an offer of a place. However, if you have been awarded, or are preparing to obtain, formal Key Skills qualifications in one or more of Numeracy, Communications and IT, or provide evidence of Key Skills in other ways, they will enhance your application."*

When invited to explain their thinking behind these policy statements, it was clear from our interviewees that they, particularly if they worked within 'selector' HEIs, had been heavily influenced by three considerations. First, there was a strong desire not to disadvantage some potential applicants by appearing to discriminate against those who

were not able to benefit fully from the reforms (e.g. learners in schools or colleges that were unable, or perhaps unwilling, to offer four subjects at advanced level, a full range of subjects, or access to the Key Skills Qualification). Second, many interviewees expressed a reluctance to introduce radical changes that might adversely affect their competitive position by deterring top quality applicants. Finally, they all wanted to maintain flexibility in their admissions procedures and, in particular, to retain a means of reconciling the demand for places with the number available.

This resulted in what many schools and colleges have perceived as a cautious or even negative approach to giving credit for specific aspects of the reforms. There is evidence to support this interpretation from the UCAS analysis of a sample of all offers made to undergraduate applicants in 2002 (UCAS 2003). This reported that, in the pre-1992 universities, over 90 per cent of all offers were made in terms of A Level achievement, and that almost 80 per cent specified achievement in three A Level subjects only. Although there was a more varied and flexible picture from other institutions, feedback from the interviews suggested a reluctance among many of those responsible for recruitment decisions, especially at departmental level, to move away from criteria they understood and which they believed had generally served their purposes well.

### **Offer-making, confirmation and Clearing**

One of the purposes of carrying out in-depth interviews with people involved in admissions decisions in HEIs was to try to get behind the formal requirements for entry published in university prospectuses. Important though they often are in narrowing the field for a particular course, these formal requirements are far from being the only



determinants as to which learners receive offers in the first place and which are eventually allocated places. For popular courses at the most prestigious universities, applicants can exceed places by a factor of ten to one or more and most of these applicants will be predicted to achieve the necessary grades - even where the requirement is set at the most demanding level. At the other end of the scale, 'recruiter' HEIs frequently set their standard offers at a level where they fully anticipate that not all places will be filled by first choice applicants who fulfil their offer requirements.

The evidence from this study is that what might be termed the '*Curriculum 2000* factors' had very little impact in shaping offers or influencing decisions on admissions at the margin. The main determinant as to whether an applicant received an offer was the actual or predicted results in their main advanced level subjects. Once applicants had been sifted on this basis, admissions tutors interviewed said that they took into account a wide range of factors in deciding which learners should receive an offer. In the 'selector' institutions and departments, these included the personal statement, the reference, evidence of interest in the subject applied for and evidence of extra-curricular activities. Although clearly a minority, some courses and institutions used interviews as a basis for selection, and others set separate tests.

When specifically asked, those interviewed for the research often stated that evidence of studying a wider range of subjects, or of studying key skills, could be one of the factors that might count in an applicant's favour. However, there was no sense that these '*Curriculum 2000* factors' were seen as sufficiently relevant to displace or supersede other considerations described above. They were simply added to the list of factors that could be weighed in reaching decisions. Their significance could at most be regarded as marginal, so much so that none of those interviewed was able to cite a specific example

where these factors had directly influenced the outcome.

Nor did it appear from our interviews, that 'Curriculum 2000 factors' carried much weight at confirmation. At this stage most admissions tutors interviewed expressed a clear preference for filling outstanding places with first choice applicants who had narrowly missed their original offers. This was widely regarded as preferable, in terms of learner commitment and retention, to opening up places to those applying through Clearing. As one head of admissions put it:

*"We look at, in kind of descending order, those people who've just missed and we just keep going down until our places are filled."*

Those HEIs in our sample who had no choice but to go into Clearing were also primarily interested in candidates' results in their main subjects. Indeed, some detected a recent trend for more applicants with higher than expected results to 'shop around' through Clearing in an attempt to secure a place on a better course. Again, there were no signs that 'Curriculum 2000 factors' carried any significant influence at this stage. Although admissions tutors on under-subscribed courses were often ready to add in points from any relevant qualification in order to give applicants credit towards an offer requirement, this was effectively a presentational device once the minimum entry requirement had been fulfilled.

**Differences between 'selector' and 'recruiter' responses to Curriculum 2000**

The analysis earlier in this article has highlighted some differences between the responses of interviewees in 'selector' or 'recruiter' institutions or departments to *Curriculum 2000*.

Interviewees from selector institutions and departments consistently attached more importance in practice to specific subject grades as the critical factor in offer/admissions decisions. Predicted A Level grades in the main subjects were more important than actual achievement at AS Level. When it came to distinguishing between learners all predicted to get three top A Level grades, factors such as the reference, personal statement, interview and the three main subjects studied carried more weight than a fourth AS in a different subject area or a Key Skills Qualification. Indeed, although admissions tutors said that a good grade in a fourth subject or the achievement of the Key Skills Qualification could, in principle, help at both the offer-making and confirmation stages, as we have commented earlier, not one of our interviewees was able to cite a specific instance where this had been the case.

Interviewees from the recruiter establishments and departments, whilst still concerned to ensure that learners had the basic knowledge and aptitude for their courses, were more likely to be flexible in their entry criteria. This meant that they came across as more encouraging of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, both in their stated entry requirements and in the offers they made to applicants. They were more likely to accept points from a separate AS Level qualification or General Studies, and were more accepting of AVCEs. Although achievement of the Key Skills Qualification was not an entry requirement, some were prepared to count the points from this qualification towards an offer, particularly at confirmation stage. The reasons underlying this approach appear to have

been essentially pragmatic. Including a wider range of qualifications in offers provided a means of allowing prospective learners to reach the minimum number of points required for admission to university. Those interviewed in recruiter institutions generally acknowledged that their published requirements probably had had no discernible effect on the decisions made. In practice, when places remained unfilled at the confirmation stage, recruiters never insisted on achievement in additional subjects or in Key Skills as a condition of an offer.

### **Expectations of future changes**

Interviewees were asked whether they anticipated any significant changes in their admissions criteria or procedures in the light of the first year's experience of recruiting *Curriculum 2000* learners. Their responses indicated that major changes were unlikely in the next couple of years. Most believed that their arrangements had worked satisfactorily in 2002 and that it was still too soon to give more weight, for example, to AS results over predicted grades - even if they were minded to do so. At the time of the interviews, universities had already published their prospectuses for 2003 applicants. The majority of our sample indicated that they had not further modified their entry requirements or admissions criteria. Furthermore, some were clearly anticipating that *Curriculum 2000* itself might be subject to further review and modification in the foreseeable future, following government statements in the aftermath of adverse publicity over the 2002 A Level examinations crisis.

One or two institutions in our study had decided to amend their policies slightly. For example, one post-1992 university had decided that points from the Key Skills

Qualification should count towards meeting offer requirements in 2003 and another recruiter institution had recently concluded that learners could, in principle, be admitted to degree courses on the basis of points gained from free-standing AS Levels. However, these were exceptions to what was otherwise very much a *status quo* position. Among pre-1992 institutions in our sample there was no apparent disposition to take active steps to embrace *Curriculum 2000* any further. Indeed, there were indications that in some respects - for example in the use of the new UCAS Tariff - the trend might, on balance, be in the opposite direction.

Most of those interviewed no longer considered *Curriculum 2000* to be at the top of their agenda when reviewing recruitment and admissions policies - if indeed it ever had been. The 'widening participation' agenda and recruitment targets were regarded by many as the two most significant factors affecting decisions in these areas. Some saw these new priorities as pulling in a different direction from the *Curriculum 2000* aim of broader advanced level programmes.

### **Higher education and the *Curriculum 2000* reforms – villains or victims?**

The over-riding conclusion from this research into the higher education response to *Curriculum 2000* is that, in practice, the reforms had little impact on admissions decisions in 2002. Offers continued to be based on achievement, expected and actual, in an applicant's main - usually three - A Level subjects. Where other factors were taken into account, our research suggests that these were much more likely to focus on personal statements, interviews or evidence of interest in the subject than on, for example, performance in a fourth AS, achievement in Key Skills, or breadth of subjects

studied. Although there were clear differences between the approach adopted by the selector and recruiter institutions and departments in our study, this does not significantly invalidate the overall conclusion.

This response by the higher education institutions in our sample is, arguably, neither surprising nor irrational. The reforms were still at an early stage of development - 2002 was the first direct experience for HEIs of recruiting learners who had studied within the new framework. There were understandable uncertainties as to the impact the reforms would have on learners' programmes of study and achievement levels. There were also justifiable doubts as to what could be read into results at AS Level in the first year, given the teething problems that had emerged and the widespread evidence that many learners were either not declaring or not 'cashing in' their results.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of the trend towards a study of four subjects in the first year, our research suggests that HEIs saw little evidence that the reforms were leading to significant changes in patterns of study among applicants. In these circumstances, a response based primarily on that which was generally considered to have served them well in the past, set within at least a veneer of recognition of the new framework, seemed to most the best pragmatic approach. In this sense, HEIs cannot be seen as the villains of the piece.

On the other hand, the representatives of HEIs we interviewed did not particularly see themselves as victims of the reforms. At least in principle, in our research we found more who welcomed the move towards greater breadth than who opposed it. However, those interviewed did see themselves as victims of the reform process in a different respect. They were put in a position not of their own choosing, where they had had to

make decisions which would inevitably have an impact on the way in which the reforms were perceived by learners, schools and colleges. Most of the staff interviewed, whatever their views on the reforms, did not see *Curriculum 2000* as in any way a higher education-driven initiative. It was widely regarded as part of the Government's attempts to meet its target of 50 per cent of 18-30 year olds entering higher education, but not as something that had arisen in direct response to pressure from higher education, nor as an initiative over which higher education had been fully consulted. Awareness of the reforms had tended to come mainly through UCAS or as a result of enquiries from schools and colleges about how entry requirements would be affected. The response of our sample of HEIs was, therefore, essentially reactive rather than proactive. Universities had had to react in some way to the changes in the curriculum, and whatever they did would inevitably send signals to those involved in post-16 education and training. The signals received by learners, schools and colleges were not always the ones that HEIs had consciously sought to convey.

In essence, the response of the HEIs involved in this research could be summarised as follows.

First, all institutions took steps to review their admissions criteria and produced statements recognising that learners were studying within a new qualifications framework. These statements set out to indicate how the new framework was being taken into account in admissions decisions. Some of the sample were more enthusiastic than others, but the tone of the statements was generally welcoming.

Second, they broadly retained their pre-existing admissions criteria and adapted them to a greater or lesser extent in the light of the changes rather than going for a more radical

overhaul. So, for example, basic entry requirements tended to remain the same - a minimum of two or three passes at A level or equivalent. Where certain subjects or types of qualifications were specified in the past, these did not alter substantially. Most significantly, the relative importance of different factors in decision-making remained much the same as it had been before. In particular, the importance of predicted grades, GCSE performance, subjects studied, personal statements, references, extra-curricular activities, interviews and additional tests did not seem to have been diminished at all by the advent of additional evidence reflecting learners' programmes of study and achievements within the new framework. Put another way, for this sample of HEIs, *Curriculum 2000* factors largely failed to dislodge pre-existing factors in the hierarchy of influences on admissions decisions.

Finally, these HEIs sought to avoid any changes that risked discriminating against learners who had not had the opportunity to take advantage of the full breadth potentially available as a result of the reforms. For most, this led to decisions not to amend their entry requirements to reflect a broader curriculum, such as a fourth subject, or the Key Skills Qualification or a combination of academic and vocational subjects.

The traditional nature of offer-making under *Curriculum 2000* is starkly conveyed in evidence from a national survey of offers made during recruitment for entry to higher education in 2002 (UCAS 2003). The UCAS survey results show that over 73 per cent of all offers were made in terms of A Levels and this figure rose to 92 per cent in the case of the pre-1992 universities. Notwithstanding the decision by a number of prestigious HEIs to require evidence of achievement in a fourth subject, the overall position showed little change from previous years. Fewer than one percent of post-1992 universities and only six per cent of pre-1992 universities specified 21 units (equivalent



to three A Levels and an AS) or more in their offers. This indicates that the volume of attainment required by universities was lower than that being offered in the majority of schools and colleges under *Curriculum 2000*. In other words, the fourth AS, taken by just over half of *Curriculum 2000* learners, was for the most part not seen as carrying any weight in applications to university. This study has found no hard evidence that, by taking full advantage of the broader programmes of study available through *Curriculum 2000*, learners were able to put themselves in a more advantageous position when applying for university.

Policy makers, working within the constraints of a voluntarist system, clearly harboured some hope that higher education would act as a driver of the reforms through its admissions policies and procedures. Similarly, schools and colleges, seeking to encourage elements of the reforms that were not immediately attractive to learners, were hoping for some 'pull through' encouragement from higher education (Hodgson and Spours 2003). On the basis of this research, any expectations that higher education might become a driving engine for *Curriculum 2000* cannot be said to have proved well-founded. Given the conflicting pressures faced by HEIs, and their lack of any real sense of ownership of the reforms, it is doubtful whether such expectations had ever had any realistic prospect of fulfilment.

**Two policy lessons from *Curriculum 2000* and the response of higher education for the reform 14-19 education in England**

This research confirms the character of *Curriculum 2000* as a voluntarist reform, the effects of which were played out in the relationship between learners, schools, colleges and higher education institutions during its first two years of implementation. In the absence of a compulsory curriculum and qualifications framework, the Government appears to have had over-optimistic expectations of the key actors. It envisaged a virtuous cycle of responses - post-16 providers would offer more subjects; learners would study broader programmes; and HEIs would recognise the reforms and change their admissions practices. By playing their part, the universities would, in turn, offer further encouragement to schools, colleges and learners to broaden advanced level study.

The research summarised in this article, which draws on both national surveys and a qualitative sample of HEIs, suggests that this positive multiplier effect of voluntarism stalled because the partial uptake of the reformed qualifications by advanced level learners was reinforced by their partial recognition by HEIs. The dynamic of partial uptake/partial recognition indicates that universities cannot simply be portrayed as having undermined the *Curriculum 2000* reform process. Rather, they were simply reacting to protect their own interests as best they could in the light of what they saw as a mixed response to the reforms within the 16-19 sector. Moreover, the Government conducted the reform process in such a rushed and exclusive manner that it failed fully to engage with higher education – a process which its optimistic voluntarism depended upon.

We suggest that two inter-related policy lessons can be drawn from the response of HE to *Curriculum 2000*. First, it is unlikely that universities will fully recognise a partial and

voluntarist advanced level qualifications reform. Second, that any attempt to produce a more universal and predictable upper secondary qualifications system will have to engage higher education at the design and development stages and not just at the point of implementation.

The current proposals for reform of upper secondary education in England through the introduction of a single system of diplomas for 14-19 year olds (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004) can be seen as a move away from the limitations of the *Curriculum 2000* reform process in two senses.

First, the proposals attempt to tackle the voluntarist relationship between upper secondary qualifications and entry to higher education by guaranteeing that all advanced level learners will take a substantial programme of study leading to a diploma, comprising a compulsory Core of Learning as well as a specified minimum volume of Main Learning (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004). The diplomas are thus intended to produce a predictability and consistency of outcome from upper secondary education in ways that *Curriculum 2000* did not.

However, the role of advanced level diplomas as a form of matriculation for higher education admission rests upon the extent to which HEIs are willing to recognise the full diploma with the potential added value it offers over current qualifications. Short of compelling HEIs to accept the diplomas for university entrance, a situation which the Government is unlikely to contemplate, the recognition of these new qualifications will principally rely upon educational argument, an assurance that all stakeholders can benefit from the new system and, crucially, how well the new diplomas prepare young people for higher education.

Second, the Tomlinson proposals for the reform of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications also attempt to address the problems associated with the reform process under *Curriculum 2000*, which was short-term, politically determined and effectively excluded higher education at the design and development stages. The proposed reform process is described as long-term and inclusive. This is intended to ensure that HEIs, as well as other stakeholders, are given the opportunity for full involvement at the principles and design stages of a new universal system. Under these circumstances, the new diploma system might come to be seen by HEIs as 'their' reform in a way that *Curriculum 2000* never was. This new context for and approach to reform is more likely to stimulate a prompt, proactive and positive response from higher education at the implementation stage, in contrast to the reactive and cautious approach that characterised the sector's stance towards *Curriculum 2000*.

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<sup>1</sup> The research reports from this project are available on ([www.ioe.ac.uk/leid/nuffield](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/leid/nuffield)) and the research has also been written up in Hodgson, A. and Spours, K. (2003) *Beyond A Levels: Curriculum 2000 and the reform of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications* London: Kogan Page.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'pre-1992' university describes HEIs existing prior to the introduction of the 'new universities' under the FHE Act of 1992. These latter institutions are termed 'post-1992 universities'.

<sup>3</sup> The UCAS Tariff is a voluntary score system for entry to higher education which gives numerical values to qualifications and thus provides comparisons between applicants with different types of achievement.

<sup>4</sup> 'Cashing in' refers to the decision by learners and their institutions to accept the AS grades achieved at the end of the first year of study as credit towards the full A Level. Learners can defer a decision to accept their AS grade if they want to resit AS modules. In this latter case, no grade would be recorded on their UCAS university application form.