

How effective are curricula for 16 to 19 year olds as preparation for university? A qualitative investigation of lecturers' views

**Conducted as part of the
HE Engagement Research Programme**

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The study

In this report we present the findings from seven focus groups conducted in four English cities with a total of 48 participants from higher education. The participants included lecturers from a diverse range of universities, who taught a variety of subjects. The study investigated higher education (HE) lecturers' views in relation to the following main and sub themes:

- A. Areas in which new undergraduates come least prepared
- B. Proportion of students who lack preparation for university study
- C. Role of grades in the level of preparedness
- D. Role of subject choice at A level and preparation for university
- E. Impact of a lack of preparation on students' success at university
- F. Ways in which HE addresses the transition challenges
- G. Areas in which new undergraduates come most prepared
- H. Role of schools and HE in preparing students for university study
 1. HE lecturers' views of A level
 2. HE lecturers' expectations from A level
 3. Subject knowledge versus core academic skills
 4. HE lecturers' views about additional educational activities set up for developing core academic or transferable skills
 5. Division of responsibility between schools and universities in preparing students for university study
- I. Nature and extent of HE involvement in the development of A levels

Each focus group was preceded by a prioritisation task in which the participants were asked to individually select the areas that undergraduates came most and least prepared for from a given list of ten skills / areas.

Main findings

A. The top three areas in which new undergraduates were considered to be least prepared were: (i) critical / higher order thinking skills, (ii) academic writing skills, and (iii) independent inquiry / research skills.

B. A majority of the new undergraduates were felt to lack preparation in these areas. The general view among the participants was that students joined university well prepared in examination techniques, but unable to carry out analytical tasks.

C. In the view of many participants, the grades achieved at A level did not really alter the picture. In their view, most of the new undergraduates, irrespective of previous grades, were not prepared for university study.

D. Some participants felt that certain subjects at A level (e.g. history and politics) were better for developing essay-writing skills whereas some other subjects (e.g. mathematics and physics) were useful in developing structured thinking. The participants also emphasised that in addition to A level content, other aspects such as the structure of assessment and the opportunity for in-depth learning were equally important in preparing students for university study.

E. A lack of preparedness was felt to result in a steep learning curve for the students, sometimes leading to students failing courses or dropping out of university. This challenge was considered to add to the financial, social, and personal challenges faced by new undergraduates.

F. The participants described several of their solutions to transitional challenges. These included delivering extra classes for undergraduates (either stand-alone or integrated within wider courses) and using particular pedagogical techniques.

G. The top three areas in which new undergraduates were considered to be most prepared were: (i) ICT skills, (ii) team work and collaborative skills, and (iii) communication / presentation skills.

H1. The participants perceived teaching at A level to involve a lot of spoon feeding, to be narrow, and to focus on teaching-to-the-test. They also thought that the modular structure of A levels and the many opportunities to re-sit examinations contributed to transitional challenges.

H2. The participants wished to see changes to assessment and pedagogy at A level. They suggested: (i) focusing assessment on learning; (ii) making the main purpose of AS level the development of transferable skills; (iii) teaching and assessing A levels linearly; (iii) developing critical thinking by building more reflection into pedagogy and assessment; and (iv) strengthening the development of research skills, independent study, analytical reading, essay-writing, academic writing, and laboratory and practical skills.

H3. Three sets of opinions emerged on the ideal balance at A level between subject knowledge and core academic skills: some participants felt that both elements were equally important; some participants believed that knowledge can be taught easily but students need to be prepared in key skills; and some other participants felt that subject knowledge could not be compromised.

H4. Participants who viewed research projects for sixth-formers positively, felt that they enabled the development of in-depth subject knowledge and enthusiasm, but should be related to the subject pursued subsequently at university. Participants who viewed such projects negatively, thought they presented same challenges as with coursework. Participants were also concerned that if research projects were made compulsory, then they would become mechanical.

H5. The participants felt that there should be more communication between schools and universities since they realised that their knowledge about A levels was limited. Such interaction would help to increase their awareness of syllabuses and examinations. This dialogue would ensure a common ground between HE and A level. The participants had diverse views about the division of responsibility for preparing students for university.

I. The general view was that HE should be involved in the development of A levels. Some participants thought involvement through secondment to schools would offer them an opportunity for a wider experience. Secondment of A level teachers to university was also recommended. However, other participants believed that the time investment that secondments entail would interfere with their own teaching responsibilities. There were mixed views on the idea of altering the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to reward involvement with A level development.