

THE NUFFIELD REVIEW OF



EDUCATION & TRAINING

RESEARCH REPORT

Nuffield Review Higher Education Focus Groups

Preliminary Report

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Emerging issues

The chief purpose of this research was to investigate, through a series of focus groups, the outcomes that Higher Education lecturers and admissions 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 students. To achieve this we asked the participants to focus on a series of questions distributed before the meeting. These questions guided the discussion during the focus groups, although inevitably unforeseen issues emerged. The main part of this paper provides a description of the major themes that emerged from these discussions. This section attempts to provide some sense of the characteristics of graduates from the 14-19 system that HE admissions staff believe would provide a solid foundation for progression into, and success within, Higher Education.

All focus groups recognised the fact that current students already possess a number of desirable traits, not least the capacity to work hard, as well as a broad range of social and problem-solving skills. There was particular praise for students' improved oral and presentation skills. In addition, there was more or less general agreement that IT skills were increasingly well-developed among new students. However, almost inevitably, the conversations in the focus groups focused on those attributes which were felt to be lacking in current students. Negative comments were not indicative of HE tutors and admissions staff whingeing or harking back to some golden age, but represented genuine concerns about young people and their capacity to benefit from the higher education experience. These concerns were both general and subject-specific. From these concerns we can suggest some features of 14-19 provision that would be deemed desirable by the HE staff with whom we discussed the issues. We stress that these are our interpretations and inferences, formed on the basis of what tutors and admissions staff told us. At this stage of our analysis seven key issues have emerged.

First, the new 14-19 system should have a significantly reduced assessment burden; one where assessment was linked to learning processes rather than to summative assessment. An over-emphasis on the latter leads to a highly instrumentalised and surface approach to learning among students, and to assessment burn out. A reduction in assessment would allow more time for teachers to work with students to ensure that they are developing a deeper understanding of the subjects that they are studying, thereby fostering deep commitment to courses.

Second, narrow accountability based on exam success and league tables needs to be avoided. This leads to spoon feeding rather than the fostering of independence and critical engagement with subject material. Learners who may have achieved academic success by such means at A Level, it was felt, are increasingly coming into HE expecting to be told the answers. They struggle to cope with the more independent and self-directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors. Furthermore, the stress on results means that there is a tendency towards extreme instrumentalism in learning: if it is not assessed then it is not important. Valuable time is lost at the beginning of HE courses developing independent learning skills that should have been developed, at least to an extent, already. This is not to deny

that higher education has a responsibility to develop such skills and abilities, but rather to stress that it should not be a task undertaken *ab initio* once a learner has entered a higher education programme.

Third, learning and assessment at Level 3 needs to place greater emphasis on what might be seen as rather traditional virtues: the ability to read critically, to communicate ideas in writing (which means using appropriate and grammatically correct language) and to argue a case. Essay-writing is a key means to achieve these ends. Higher education recognises its role in developing these skills further, but it needs more to build upon. The extended essay was perceived as a potential means to develop such skills. Nevertheless these skills need developing in a range of contexts with a good deal of practice and feedback from teachers, rather than being a one-off exercise.

Fourth, choice and breadth within subjects are important, but should not be at the expense of adequate coverage of core ideas. There are certain core ideas in all subjects that need to be understood. For example, in history some sense of the span of historical time, rather than a limited focus on specific periods (the Tudors and the Nazis were mentioned again and again). In science subjects the desire was for a small core of mathematics concepts – especially algebra – that could be used reliably rather than trying to cover too much material more superficially. Such issues are being discussed in subject associations. More discussion of this sort is needed and this discussion needs to be fed back effectively into procedures for qualification and curriculum design.

Fifth, learning at Level 3 should lead to the development of a coherent understanding across topic domains within a subject. All subjects have key ideas and skills but the focus on modular assessment as currently practised was felt to lead to the development of a ‘modular mind’, where learners were not fully aware of the utility of ideas developed in one place in a course for thinking in another area.

Sixth, the alphabet soup of vocational qualifications needs to be clarified and simplified if vocational qualifications are to be taken more seriously. The discussions held also implied that tailoring Level 3 vocational qualifications, intended to provide a dual progression route, too closely to the demands of employers could be counter-productive if this led to, for example, a reduced emphasis on maths at the expense of functional numeracy. For a vocational learner to progress to and be successful on business studies, engineering, and applied science courses requires a solid base in mathematics.

Seventh, the issue of advice and guidance, though not specifically a task for the developers of new qualifications, needs to be addressed urgently. Too many young people are applying for university courses with poorly configured learning profiles developed through the 14-19 phase. This includes, for example, the belief that six AS Levels equal three A Levels, or that attainment in an eclectic combination of subjects which they enjoy (and in which they attain high grades), qualified them to study for a particular degree.

We should not assume that all is well with the GCSE → GCE A Level progression route to HE which was the main topic of discussion in all the focus groups. As a qualification, GCE A Level has become uncoupled from its original purpose of qualifying a young person for studying a subject in higher education rather than certificating that they have passed a course of study. It may be appropriate for GCE A Level today to have a wider function than the purpose for which they were

originally conceived. However, there may be a cost associated with this wider purpose: the reduced ‘teachability’ of new undergraduates, which places the efficiency of the UK higher education sector at risk. This is not to say that higher education institutions will not continue to recruit young people who have not been adequately prepared for higher study (simple economics will ensure that), but it does mean that resources will have to be diverted into remedial teaching if those students are not to be failed at the end of their first year and so drop out.

What HE tutors are looking for is, in effect, really quite simple to state (but difficult to achieve in practice): students who are committed to studying a subject, engaging critically with ideas, prepared to take some intellectual risks and able to use a range of skills to develop arguments. This ‘wish’ list should not be construed as a rather whimsical harking back to some previous golden age. The view expressed again and again was that higher education should foster the development of such skills, but that the current arrangements for 14-19 learning increasingly meant they had to do this *ab initio*, i.e. the current qualification structures and assessment arrangements (combined with narrow accountability measures) were counter-productive to developing these desirable attributes. In so saying, they were sympathetic towards the challenges facing secondary school and college teachers. What they criticised was a system failure to produce desirable characteristics because of the sorts of incentives created by, for example, an over-emphasis on modular assessment and narrow accountability measures.

It is also important to remember the power of the expectations of higher education admissions processes to undermine curriculum initiatives, such as key skills and the Scottish over-arching award. Clearly, higher education needs to be more widely consulted about proposed changes to the 14-19 education and training system, which does not exist in a vacuum. Higher education’s voice is not the only one that needs to be listened to in constructing a new 14-19 system, but it is an important one that schools and colleges heed. Furthermore, these discussions need to be two way, with HE curricula adapting to the changing 14-19 structures, as well as the evolving 14-19 system paying due heed to the legitimate expectations of higher education teachers and admissions staff. The focus group discussions indicated that the current round of changes and proposed reforms of the 14-19 system represented a real opportunity for such discussions to take place, but sufficient time, resources and political will need to be devoted to them.

Background and purpose of the study

The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training has carried out an investigation of what higher education (HE) would like from the 14-19 phase of education and training. This work has taken the form of a series of focus groups held in 21¹ Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across England and Wales and chosen as a cross-section of types of institution and mission, and including HE provision within FE. The focus groups have been organised in each HEI by UCAS’ contacts in its member institutions.²

¹ The institutions included 12 pre-1992 institutions, 4 post-1992 institutions, 4 FE colleges offering HE provision and 1 university college. Nearly 250 participants in total took part in the focus groups.

² Most of the organisers in the HEIs involved were members of the UCAS/DfES Curriculum Development Group, which acts as a vehicle for consultation and for the dissemination of information about pre-HE curriculum developments to the HE sector.

The Nuffield Review is completely independent of Government and its agencies, and ranges more widely than the Tomlinson Working Group on 14-19 Reform, which published its final report on 18 October 2004. The Review is investigating a number of areas of 14-19 education and training, including the central issue of transition to HE. The Government's response to Tomlinson's proposals in the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper published on 23 February 2005 underlines the desirability of a continuing independent review. The White Paper is being followed by an extended programme of development and implementation in which HE should be involved as one of the key stakeholders. The White Paper also leaves open the possibility of further dialogue on some form of added value to the academic curriculum and suggests 2008 as a review date. The outcomes of the focus groups will be valuable in informing these processes as well as adding an HE dimension to the growing body of evidence being gathered by the Review.

UCAS' involvement in the investigation forms part of its work in the field of curriculum and qualifications aimed to facilitate progression to HE and to improve levels of understanding of qualifications and progression routes on the part of staff in HE involved in all aspects of recruitment and admissions. This work includes staff development and consultancy for staff in both 14-19 and HE institutions, training for those who advise applicants, the publication of briefings for HE on curriculum and qualifications, the role of the Curriculum Development Group in providing an HE voice on pre-HE curriculum matters, and the development of the UCAS Tariff.

The purpose of this study is to tease out what HE would ideally like the 14-19 phase of the future to deliver in order to facilitate progression to HE, and to gather evidence about perceptions on the part of HE staff of the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum and its delivery in schools and colleges in England and Wales. The issues are complex, and therefore, rather than sending questionnaires or conducting a formal consultation, it was decided to adopt the focus group approach in order to create an opportunity for extended conversations with a range of relevant HE staff including admissions officers, admissions tutors from a variety of discipline areas, staff responsible for curriculum planning and for the delivery of the HE curriculum (particularly the first year of study), curriculum specialists, education research officers, senior managers, liaison officers and widening participation officers. The focus groups have been moderated by staff from UCAS and researchers from the Nuffield Review.

The work with HEIs took place in the context of a number of factors that currently influence recruitment and admissions to HE. These include:

- The recommendations of the Schwartz group on fair admissions, including an emphasis on transparency and accountability (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group 2004).
- The issues of selection in high-demand subject areas where it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between well-qualified students.
- The growth of subject-specific admissions testing and the possible use of generic admissions tests.
- The development of vocational qualifications and pathways that are not always fully understood and recognised by HE.
- The imperative to widen participation while not eroding standards.
- The increasing flexibility of the 14-19 curriculum and the consequent greater diversity of applicants' programmes.

- Underlying concerns about basic numeracy and literacy, and perceived problems with higher level mathematical skills, essay-writing and independent learning skills.
- Concerns about over-assessment in the 14-19 curriculum and the perceived tendency for modularised assessment to bring about a target-orientated, instrumental approach to learning.
- The introduction of variable fees and a system of bursaries administered by individual HEIs, which may have unpredictable effects on applicant behaviour.
- The likely future introduction of a post-qualification application system (PQA).

All of these factors have had an influence on the responses of HE staff to the questions in the focus groups.

Methodology

Focus group research involves group discussion, around a pre-defined theme. It offers the opportunity to find out why people think as they do, and to 'elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic' (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996, p.4; see also Kitzinger, 1995; Gibbs, 1997). This focus group research included 21 institutions (including three pilot institutions), in order to reflect the diversity of the institutional landscape in HE in England and Wales.

An initial schedule of focus group questions was developed in the light of pilot focus groups in three HEIs. The same revised schedule was then used at all the remaining institutions. A group exercise was also used: participants (divided into one or two groups depending on numbers in the focus groups) were asked to discuss and write down both concerns about, and sources of satisfaction with, 14-19 education and training. The focus groups in this project were scheduled to last one and a half hours.

Two facilitators were present in most groups. The questions were shared between the two facilitators. One facilitator in each group took charge of the recording equipment and observation of interactions within the group. In this project, the majority of the focus groups had between eight and ten participants, which the research literature suggests is the optimal size. The focus groups were held at individual HEIs, and in most cases there were two focus groups respectively, in order to guard against overly large groups of participants. Participation in the focus groups was on a voluntary basis, and participants were invited to participate by the organisers at the HEIs. As such, the samples were not purposive, although the researchers made it clear to the organisers that they were interested in subject specialists, admissions staff and staff in other relevant roles such as widening participation, learner support and school liaison work. Anonymity of participants was guaranteed at the start of each focus group, and were asked if they agreed to the recording of the discussions.

Discussions were tape recorded for the purpose of analysis. The initial phase of data analysis involved identifying the major themes, before moving on to coding the data, categorising the codes and negotiating the categories. This project involved both discrete analysis of individual focus groups, as well as the cross-focus-group analysis which forms the main basis of this report.

It is important to state that focus groups are not intended to be representative, and that while these findings emerge from a range of institutions, it is not our claim that the views expressed by individuals are representative of views across the sector. Rather they are illustrative of themes and issues identified from the research.

Sources of variation in institutional contexts

The views offered by participants in the focus groups are, of course, influenced by the institutional contexts they find themselves in and by a number of other factors, within and between both institutions and subject areas. For example, some institutions may be either broadly selecting or recruiting, but broadly selecting institutions may contain some recruiting departments or courses, and in broadly recruiting HEIs, entry to some courses may be highly competitive. The complexity of this situation cannot be reduced to a simple typology of pre- and post-1992 HEIs and FE/HE colleges.

In addition, HEIs orientate themselves differently in terms of recruitment on the international, national, regional and local stages. Inevitably, this results in heterogeneous student bodies, in terms of age, prior qualifications, prior experience and personal circumstances. Further, there are differences in the perceptions of applicants' previous educational experience and qualifications and their potential to succeed in HE. At its most extreme, this leads some HEIs to discount certain vocational qualifications completely or, more commonly, to feel insecure in making judgements about the suitability of applicants for higher study who have qualifications other than A Levels. In part, this is the result of an overly complex vocational qualification system, which busy admissions tutors do not have time to investigate fully.

A further source of variation stems from the fact that some HEIs can be characterised as primarily 'receiving' institutions in that they provide few, if any, courses below Level 4. By contrast, other institutions offer a range of courses from entry level upwards, and further education colleges offering higher education provision both 'receive and send' qualifications at Level 4 and below, as well as delivering Access courses.

Variation in expectation also occurs between different subject areas. Expectations of what is appropriate vary in terms of students' attributes and attitudes, subject-specific knowledge and skills, both at the application stage and during the course. For example, more vocational areas, including physiotherapy and other health sciences, law, performing arts and engineering, often look for personal attributes and dispositions over and above academic attainment and potential.

Admissions policies differ significantly between and within HEIs. For some, the process is highly centralised, involving a central admissions team implementing university-wide admissions policy, and in others the process is decentralised with decisions being made within departments. In yet others, there is an intermediate position involving elements of both. Despite such variability, a number of recurrent issues emerged across all institutional types and subject areas in the focus group research.

Recurrent issues

Qualification structure and design

Modularity

The modular³ nature of 14-19 qualifications was a matter of concern across almost all institutions and was viewed as causing a number of problems, including over-assessment, compartmentalised learning, a lack of incremental learning, a poorly developed overview of subjects and an inability to connect discrete areas of knowledge.

For example, participants felt that the modular structure of qualifications led to over-assessment and a more instrumental mind-set:

There is too much focus on coursework and on repeated assessment. The Lower Sixth loses a third of the year to examinations, and students are frightened of examinations and want to learn and forget, rather than learn and know.

There used to be a Sixth Form taster conference in history, but now they do not want to know if it is not specifically geared to a particular module they will be examined on.

Issues raised surrounding modular structures included a '*fragmentation of knowledge*', which participants related to both methods of curriculum delivery and assessment practices:

Three-month modules mean students present a mosaic rather than a picture.

With modules, students sometimes focus on peripheral items and not the basis of subjects. They lose the synoptic aspects.

The only thing they are interested in is getting a mark in the short term. The modular system means they forget what they've learnt.

Further, participants were concerned that it was possible for applicants to combine A Level modules in a subject like mathematics in a way which did not provide a firm grounding for undergraduate study in areas such as engineering and physical sciences. With regard to physics, for example:

There has been a change because of modular development in A Levels. The focus is on gap-filling rather than a coherent approach. Physics, though, is a linear subject, so this is a real problem. I would like to see a backtrack from modular examinations, although our hands are not clean at universities either. There is a need for longevity in the learning process.

³ This was the term used by focus group participants. The regulatory authorities and awarding bodies, however, now use the term 'unitised'.

Coursework

Coursework at GCSE and beyond was regarded with ambivalence. While the purposes and aims were viewed positively, the reality was viewed with a degree of suspicion, in terms of its usefulness in indicating attainment, developing independent learning skills and providing the opportunity for young people to demonstrate innovative thinking. For example:

Coursework should develop independent learning, but the aims have been subverted by middle-class families. There is a lack of independent learning structures.

It was also noted that the emphasis on coursework in many 14-19 programmes meant they were not good preparation for HE courses which relied heavily on unseen examinations (although some participants noted that unseen examinations were rare in the world of work).

There was widespread concern about the level of support being provided for young people to complete their coursework (*How can you tell who's actually done it?*). The view was that some young people received too much support, while other young people, because of their personal circumstances, did not have access to similar levels of support. This led some participants to distrust the utility of coursework as a signal of potential. These concerns could potentially also apply to the proposed extended project:

The extended project as suggested by Tomlinson could also be susceptible to the same problems as coursework.

It would not be possible to trust the extended essay and it would be just another burden. There would be lots of copying from Google.

'Teaching to the test'

There was also widespread concern that the current system, with its associated accountability mechanisms, was forcing teachers into a position of 'teaching to the test':

Schools are too interested in performance and league tables. They are conscious that what students study has an effect on the performance of the school.

Participants felt that this reinforced the compartmentalisation of learning and the adoption of a more instrumental, outcome-based perspective on the part of students. For example:

Students show an instrumentalist approach, and it is difficult to combat that. There is a commodification of knowledge, and a sense that they want to 'move on, get the badge'.

I don't like the 'empty file pad syndrome', when students arrive at a seminar with an empty pad, waiting for the solutions simply to be communicated to them. The attitude is often: 'What do I need to know in order to be able to do the examination?' There's a search for people who break out of that mould. We're also looking for excitement about learning, not just seeing HE as a machine, feeding in one end and out the other. It shouldn't just be seen as the next stage to getting a job.

This approach to teaching was thought to inhibit the development of qualities such as critical thinking, risk-taking ('...*increased testing doesn't encourage risk-taking*'), a thirst for knowledge and an enquiring mind. Students were felt to focus too much on assessment: '*...all they care about is ticking boxes*'.

AS and A2

The splitting of A Levels into AS and A2 components was viewed both positively and negatively. On a positive note, the introduction of AS Levels as a result of the Curriculum 2000 reforms was thought to have increased opportunities for breadth of study, and to have allowed students to try a subject and drop it after one year but still gain an outcome.

On the other hand, the introduction of AS Levels was thought to have contributed significantly to assessment fatigue and the demise of extra-curricular activities, and the AS student experience was described as '*hurried and packed*'. Further, students were said to be '*examined out of existence*', to display post-A Level '*learning exhaustion*', and arrive '*washed out*' at HE. Also, it was felt that AS- levels did not always provide breadth in practice:

With the Curriculum 2000 regime, AS Levels tend to be in complementary subjects. If students can get away with dropping something they don't want to specialise in they will.

In addition, AS Levels are not seen as a sufficient basis for HE study, in terms of the knowledge and skills they develop. These were not criticisms of either the learners or the institutions they attend, but rather a critique of the lack of room for manoeuvre in an over-burdened curriculum and qualification structure. It was felt that students had not been guided to be sensitive to the complexity and uncertainty of knowledge, but rather expected 'right and wrong' answers:

Students see AS and A Levels as a checklist of things to learn and tick off. They have to deconstruct their knowledge when they get to university.

The structure of the assessment instruments, with an emphasis on shorter answers, was also a source of concern. It was felt this disadvantaged students in terms of the development of their essay- and report-writing skills:

*They need to be taught essay-writing skills at university. (biology)
But it would be nice if schools did this! (physics)*

Qualifications and progression to HE

The focus group discussions emphasised the importance of qualifications, in terms of gaining access to HE. Issues addressed included the choice of subjects, the role and contribution of breadth, the importance of specialist knowledge, especially in the natural sciences, and the role of vocational qualifications, which was a significant issue in some HEIs, and a significant absence in others.

Breadth and depth in the post-16 curriculum

There was intense discussion about the value of breadth in the post-compulsory curriculum. Many participants welcomed breadth as a concept, which was, however, often interpreted as one contrasting subject within a student's clutch of A Levels.

Breadth was viewed as evidence of an appropriate level of general education, as evidence of a 'rounded' applicant, or as a signal of useful skills which may be under-developed within more subject-specific entry requirements.

The following exchanges between focus group participants at two institutions indicate the range of issues debated:

We value breadth. The funnier the better for the third A Level. Music is acceptable. We want something that shows a good level of general education. The breadth that IB offers is valuable. (medical school)
Any interesting A Level is acceptable. (mathematics)
We don't want three straight sciences – they need to be able to write essays. (management studies)
I'd like more breadth. We need people who can talk and communicate. (physics)
We prefer A Levels in biology, chemistry and maths, otherwise they struggle with the maths. (biochemistry)
Parents expect us to want three straight sciences and they are surprised that we accept subjects such as religious studies. (medical school)
We get a mixture of subjects offered, including maths and science. We are delighted. (English)

Breadth is positive, with exposure to a variety of subject areas. This brings a certain 'freshness' to the course. (chemistry)
Those with greater breadth find the first year more taxing but are the better graduates in engineering. There is similar anecdotal evidence for physics. (engineering)
The medical school encourages applicants to have a language too. (humanities)

However, for some subject areas – particularly mathematics, sciences, health care, and areas requiring specialised skills such as art and design – a solid foundation in specialist knowledge and skills was seen as vital for coping with HE-level study in the subject, and in some cases was a requirement of professional bodies. Qualifications in specified subjects were either a formal requirement, or definitely preferred, for many courses: '*we stipulate ... physics and maths: these are necessary to stand a chance on the course.*' For a number of participants too much subject-specific knowledge was seen as a disadvantage:

If a student has done a business A Level or Vocational A Levels and then do a business degree, they are not good students because they have little life experience.

Focus group participants involved in the delivery of vocational HE viewed breadth differently. It was felt that some vocational courses required students to focus fairly narrowly on occupationally-related knowledge and skills, and that ability or experience relative to this knowledge and skills was more important than a broader set of skills. Also, participants argued that applicants for these courses, who were often occupationally-committed and wanted to focus on a narrow area, would be put off by requirements for too much breadth.

Participants also commented on the value of breadth and depth within subject areas. For example, there was concern about narrowness within particular curriculum areas, such as history:

The history curriculum is now too narrow – Hitler, Stalin, British nineteenth century. They are no longer encouraged to do medieval history A Level; the Tudors and Stuarts are also endangered. But they need to go back further in time to understand what is going on in the twentieth century.

The International Baccalaureate

There was a good deal of enthusiasm about the International Baccalaureate (IB), primarily from the more selective HEIs, in terms of the breadth of knowledge it offers, the performance of students who have come to HEIs with the IB, and the cross-curricular and synoptic elements of the IB. Indeed, the IB was referred to almost euphorically in some institutions and compared favourably with the A Level. However, there was debate about what the IB was signalling – whether it was a qualification signal or an indication of the type of student who took the IB, and the type of institution that offered the qualification. A number of participants indicated concern that only a limited number of 14-19 institutions were able to offer IB courses as an alternative, and were concerned that preference for IB applicants would operate counter to widening participation initiatives. Furthermore, there are issues about the transparency of grading within grouped awards. This is reflected in the offer-making process through which IB applicants are typically asked for both a certain number of diploma points, representing overall achievement in a grouped award, plus specific requirements to be met in the higher level subjects they have taken (such as a Grade 6 in higher level mathematics).

The following exchange at one institution indicates some of the issues addressed:

Everyone in Years 12 and 13 should do some maths – that's why the IB is good. There's also concern that languages are no longer compulsory after 14. (social and historical sciences)

I second that! (English)

We are part of Europe, but students are now reluctant to learn additional languages. They focus on passing the exam, but not doing anything beyond that. There are problems with filling placements for exchanges with European universities. (social and historical sciences)

The IB is good: it is challenging material in what students specialise in, and is also good for broadening. A Level fails on both counts. (mathematics)

Vocational qualifications

With regard to vocational qualifications, the bewildering range of courses and awards on offer was clearly difficult for admissions departments, and for subject tutors. Frustration was expressed that more detailed curriculum and assessment information was not readily available:

Admissions tutors are asking students for information about BTEC Nationals; there is a massive gap of understanding.

In further education colleges offering higher education provision, issues surrounding vocational qualifications arose within the institutions' roles as both receiving and sending institutions. In the latter role, there was some concern about the currency of the qualifications for entry into other HEIs. However, as receiving institutions, these institutions were extremely well-informed about the range of vocational qualifications held by applicants. BTECs were held in high regard as preparation for vocational higher education courses:

All BTEC courses are a good foundation for vocational HE courses because the methodology is the same.

Some participants compared students who came with A Levels with those who held vocational qualifications such as BTEC. Students with A Levels were perceived to be '*more academically able*', better at writing essays, while students with BTEC were perceived to be better at teamwork.

Nevertheless, participants from another institution identified potential problems for applicants with vocational qualifications and their progression to HE. Among the issues raised were a mismatch in assessment tools between vocational courses pre-19 and HE:

I'm more confident to offer A Levels a place because they're more exam-based. AVCEs are coursework-based, students can resubmit. This becomes part of their mindset, but they can't do the same in HE.

One participant identified issues with progression to HE stemming from the narrower focus of vocational courses:

Students with three A Levels have the opportunity to pursue any of the strands or indeed a different one ... for students taking qualifications such as the BTEC National in Catering there are issues about progression other than to a closely-related course.

It is important to note that vocational qualifications were not even mentioned in a number of HEIs, the unspoken assumption being that the norm was for applicants to have A Levels. Where vocational qualifications were mentioned in these institutions, often by one or two individuals only within a group, participants voiced suspicion about their value for progression to higher education. Some acknowledged that they were not familiar with the content and structure of vocational qualifications and that they had seen too few applicants or students with these qualifications to come to any conclusions as to their usefulness. One participant expressed this situation as follows:

A lot of admissions staff in HE and in positions of influence themselves studied traditional programmes. They have therefore a limited knowledge of GCSE, the vocational route and qualifications frameworks.

Literacy and numeracy skills

There was a perception of a general decline in both linguistic and mathematical fluency, as well as some general concerns about basic literacy and numeracy skills. Participants argued that students lacked the ability to manipulate language and number appropriately and effectively for the purpose of learning in HE. This point was in no way limited to the institutions recruiting those with lower levels of achievement. Indeed, one highly selective subject within a selecting institution commented that it '*was able to skim the cream of candidates, but even they do not necessarily know how to use an apostrophe*'. Also, it is notable that literacy skills were important to scientists as well as participants from an arts and humanities or social science background: *We don't want scientists who can't write at all, or social*

and historical scientists who are statistically illiterate or unable to manipulate data.
The following exchange at one institution illustrates these issues well:

Basic writing skills are lacking. (admissions office)
They can't even write in sentences. Their spelling is appalling. They can't be understood. (physics)
They don't know how to write essays – they just assemble bits from the Internet. Elementary maths is missing. They can't put decent sentences together. There is no provision in university for people who can't write essays. (biology)
They can't structure a set of ideas in a logical sequence. (physics)
They can't write in sentences – they produce meaningless work. (mathematics)
They graduate with a 2:1 but they still can't spell or write English! (physics)

There was particular concern about mathematical competence in those subjects which rely upon mathematical knowledge and the ability to apply concepts. This applies to mathematics degrees, of course, but also to engineering, business studies, chemistry, physics and medical sciences. For other courses with some statistical content (but for which mathematical knowledge and concepts were less central) participants felt it was desirable for students to have numerical skills, but that students often disliked or feared working with numbers:

Students hate numbers, they're scared stiff of numbers.

Students ask us 'is there a lot of Maths on the course?' and if there is, they don't want to know.

Literacy and numeracy issues ranged from concerns over basic grammar through to an acknowledgement that students knew about basic algebraic manipulation but lacked the confidence and capability to undertake such manipulation unsupported. This was felt to be due primarily to a lack of practice, which may reflect the time pressures within the current 14-19 curriculum. Here, a common view was that it might be better to focus on the development and practice of a core of skills that could be reliably depended upon, rather than have too great a breadth of content exposure.

Essay-writing was seen as a challenge across the range of HEIs. It was felt that students struggled to build a logical and sustained argument and communicate this argument fluently, both in written and oral form. In part this was attributed to a decreased opportunity to develop these skills within the current A Level assessment structure. It was argued that essay writing skills could be developed by providing greater opportunity for extended writing, debate and individual project work. Participants argued that the proposed extended project could potentially support the development of these skills – if implemented appropriately. However, concerns were expressed over the timing of the project, whether it could potentially become just another assessment hurdle to get an A Level rather than a learning opportunity, the assessment structures, plagiarism and the level of external support (from home and from educational institutions). Ideally, admissions staff might read the students' extended projects, but many recognised this was unlikely given the constraints on their time. There was also a concern that if it was likely not to be formally assessed it would potentially not be taken seriously by students or by HE. For this reason some participants argued in favour of the extended project as a major component of an overarching award.

To overcome some of these literacy and numeracy problems, some HEIs were providing additional mathematics and literacy support, usually in the first year of undergraduate study. A number of institutions indicated that they offered, or were considering offering, additional courses and basic study skills support.

Remedial Maths courses are on offer, and the department has employed a Learning Officer to help with 'how to learn'.

This criticism applies to those applicants with top A Level grades as well as to those with lower levels of attainment. It would seem that post-1992 institutions and in particular FE colleges offering HE provision, are more willing to provide appropriate support for students. Other institutions and subject areas feel they can ill-afford the time and resources within the pressures of the higher degree courses. This problem is perceived to have a knock-on effect on higher degree course structures. For example:

No actual civil engineering is done in the first semester, and the second year material has now moved to the third year.

Some participants suggested that higher degree courses would need to be lengthened in order to cope with the greater variability in language and numeracy skills among current applicants.

Study skills

It was recognised that applicants were coming to HE with different skill sets compared to previous student generations. Feelings about this were mixed. On the one hand, there was praise for the students' improved presentation skills, their capacity for hard work and their ability to juggle a range of demands on their time and energy:

They must demonstrate flexibility. They should juggle a variety of tasks such as part-time job, sporting commitments. They need to be able to make informed decisions and think on their feet.

For a large proportion of students, this included the need to engage in paid employment while studying, and this was seen to limit the time available for study:

There are also economic pressures, so if a student has a half-day off they are more likely to spend it working in Tesco than working in the library.

Learners' ability to retrieve information was also praised, but students were often felt to lack the ability to appraise this information critically and evaluate its usefulness in constructing an argument. A lack of experience of referencing conventions and a lack of understanding about the concept of plagiarism and its academic unacceptability was also a source of widespread anxiety:

There are issues over plagiarism and citation. At an earlier age students are told to copy verbatim.

Here, the Internet was seen as both positive and negative, with the uncritical way information downloaded from the Internet was used being seen as a particular problem. In addition, there was concern that the Internet was beginning to be seen as a replacement for more traditional library-based work, as shown by the following discussion:

They don't need library skills any more – they just regurgitate what they read in textbooks. (management studies)

They cut and paste essays from the web. Reading books is a skill which has been lost. (physics)

They don't browse hard-copy journals any more. They can only cope with electronic format. (biology)

Concerns about particular subjects

Modern Foreign Languages

Another recurrent issue raised by participants was the downgrading of modern foreign languages from a statutory requirement to an entitlement area of learning at Key Stage 4, leading to the concern that some young people were being denied this option by their schools and were thus not being equipped to participate in the European labour market. Further, many participants were extremely concerned about the fact that independent schools now tend to offer more language instruction than state schools.

A range of different issues regarding the study of modern foreign languages emerged, and it was not only language specialists who were concerned about declining numbers learning one or more foreign languages from 14, and particularly post-16. One set of issues were to do with who has the entitlement to study modern foreign languages. Focus group participants at one institution were concerned that not all pupils had the same opportunities:

The entitlement to modern foreign languages is seen as problematic. Of course, not everyone will go on to study languages at HE level, but the opportunity to continue should be there ... This is a self-perpetuating situation. There's a problem of the marketing of subjects – this seems to be done more effectively by subjects such as media studies and drama studies, and there is uncertainty regarding how to sell French to young people, for example. (modern foreign languages)

The hardest A Levels are perceived to be maths, sciences and languages. (admissions)

Languages, as well as Maths and sciences, seem to be increasingly becoming the preserve of those in the independent sector – this is alarming! (modern foreign languages)

Another set of issues were to do with employability in a European context:

In Europe, there is an insistence on a semester abroad. There is a problem of short-termism as the labour market becomes more European, and the lack of language knowledge will become more problematic. Employability problems

may well emerge, and there is a need to encourage language learning to a greater extent ... Internships at L'Oréal in Paris have been used as carrots.

This involves the deskilling of pupils in the European context. There is a need for a modern language backdrop – in the context of Erasmus and the European fitness industry. There is a need for these students to bring language skills with them.

Further, participants identified a lack of continuity in content and difficulty between languages at GCSE and A Level. It was argued that the significant jump in difficulty between GCSE languages and A Level languages was a potential barrier to students' continuing with languages post-16, particularly for bright students:

GCSE languages have been overhauled. You get marks for basic communication, not accuracy ... Brighter students are not stretched enough, so they don't perceive it is an intellectual discipline or a serious subject, and are turned off.

Science

A number of participants were concerned that the combined science GCSE was not a good foundation for scientific study in higher education. Physical scientists particularly argued that the non-specialist teachers who often taught on combined science GCSE courses could hardly be expected to communicate an enthusiasm for the subject, or to have gained suitable depth of subject knowledge themselves.

A lot of science teachers are not trained beyond A Level, some not even GCSE. They can't inspire if they have a low level [of training].

The point was also raised that students' enthusiasm for science was being curbed, partly by the lack of time available for hands-on, practical work:

In science subjects students have less practical skills now than previously. The problem may lie in the curriculum – there is less space for practical experiments, students lose the excitement for science.

Arts and crafts

Some participants were also anxious about a downgrading of creative arts in 14-19 education and training, although this was mentioned less frequently than modern foreign languages and science as an area of concern.

Fewer people are taking creative arts. A Level music has been farmed out to consortia. We get applications to study music when students have not studied music because there was no provision.

Further education colleges offering higher education provision were also interested in applicants' craft and practical skills, particularly in subject areas such as design, costume design and art and design in general. The participants indicated that there had been a serious decline in these skills, which they related to a lack of opportunity to develop and practise them in the 14-19 curriculum. This lack of craft skills at HE level potentially '*means that the students cannot progress professionally*'.

Application and admissions processes

Examination results and predicted grades

Examination results and predicted grades remain the key source of information used to assess the suitability of a candidate for admission to a particular course. However, there was a degree of suspicion about predicted grades at A Level, as well as dissatisfaction with the non-compulsory nature of the reporting of AS results, as well as the complex rules around cashing in. Participants at some institutions said they also looked very closely at GCSE results as predictors of ability, partly because they were firm rather than predicted results. The concern was expressed in a number of institutions that the current structure of the AS Levels meant that a student could take an examination more than once, but only report the best result.

Participants from selecting institutions often emphasised the need for further differentiation in the top grades at A Level. Suggestions to achieve this included the reporting of raw examination scores or percentiles. In addition, subject tutors in these HEIs (especially from mathematics and sciences) said they would welcome access to individual unit grades and unit choices. Some participants, however, felt there were dangers inherent in requesting extra information:

More information on grades would be useful. But if made an official requirement this could lead to more emphasis on the things we want to de-emphasise.

There was a general consensus that the proposal to add A* and A** grades would not solve the problem.

Admission processes in recruiting HEIs, where the candidates often had been predicted relatively low Grades at A Level, often used grades in maths and English GCSEs as a guide to the suitability of applicants. However, many participants in these institutions said their focus was on recruitment, and they provided appropriate additional support for learners once they arrived on their chosen programme. Furthermore, recruiting institutions, or recruiting courses within selective institutions, were likely to look at factors other than examination grades when assessing the suitability of an applicant:

Subjects like maths and MFL can look for interest in the subject, because they are not rejecting thousands of applications.

It is important to look at all the factors across the board.

If they have the qualifications that's great ... But if they haven't and have done something else which I feel is of value in the context of the outdoor studies programme ... this can compensate for low grades.

The status of general studies A Level in relation to admissions was complex, as was the case with more recently introduced A Level subjects. In some selecting HEIs, general studies was accepted, but in most it was not, and on occasion it was summarily dismissed as a subject. Attitudes and admissions policies, even within the same HEI, could vary widely:

A good grade in A Level general studies is a good predictor of whether students have the basic skills. (management studies)

We accept general studies as equivalent to any other A Level. (mathematics)

We don't accept general studies as it is mostly done by independent schools. If they only get a grade C in general studies, that is a worrying sign. (English)

Some schools coach for general studies and some don't, so it's not fair. We don't consider it. (biology)

I agree it's not fair to consider it. (medical school)

Several participants (particularly at pre-1992 institutions) were suspicious of the value of some of the newer A Level subjects. Other participants however stated that it did not matter which subjects applicants offered.

There was also a degree of uncertainty about the status of the fourth A Level and the AEAs in admissions processes. Some participants said they liked students to have a fourth A Level, but for others the widening participation agenda meant that they did not consider achievement in a fourth A Level in admissions decisions on the grounds that not all applicants have the opportunity to study for an additional A Level. The same applied to AEAs: while some admissions staff and subject tutors welcomed AEAs, others indicated that they could not take them into account when making offers because this qualification was not available in all 14-19 institutions.

Qualifications other than A or AS Level were often viewed as problematic in admissions decisions, even among participants who supported vocational qualifications as a basis for progression to higher education. For example, participants noted that it was difficult to compare different students with the same BTEC National qualification (because they could take completely different sets of modules, and because of concerns about assessment procedures), and that the grading system did not provide enough information for the purposes of differentiation.

Post-Qualification Admissions

Attitudes to post-qualification admissions (PQA) when it came up within institutions were always complex. Some staff within an institution welcomed the idea whereas others had reservations. These reservations related to the administrative implications of a shift to PQA for HEIs (for example, the processing of applications) and also to the implications of PQA for 14-19 institutions (for example, it could potentially shorten the time available for A Level study). In addition, it was argued that PQA would have little impact on the difficulties of differentiation between the very best applicants if those students who would have been predicted three As at A Level achieved three grade As. Furthermore, some participants were concerned that the introduction of a PQA system would reinforce the role of A Levels as the key entrance qualification for HE, which was undesirable as they felt that A Level grades were not necessarily a good predictor of performance on HE programmes.

Personal statements and references

Personal statements and references were seen to have value in the admissions process, but concerns were expressed about the authenticity of the personal statement. Some participants found the personal statement useful for gaining additional information about candidates about their background and their interest in

the course they were applying for. Others, however, felt that the personal statement could be formulaic and potentially vulnerable to undue external influence from parents and teachers. The following comments highlight some of the issues:

The personal statement is not 100% foolproof but reading between the lines you can distinguish genuine interest from someone going through the motions.

But the personal statement could be written by the parent or edited by the school – this happens especially in independent schools. This could explain why some candidates cannot back up what is in their personal statement in interviews.

Admissions tutors can be put off by poor grammar and spelling mistakes in a personal statement, but other applicants possibly had external help.

The quality of the references was seen to reflect the experience of the teachers who were writing them, in terms of their precision and the range of information given about candidates. Some participants felt the references, as well as the personal statements, could be rather bland and formulaic: '*... [we get] the same glowing references for widely differing levels of attainment.*' There was also a feeling among some participants that the personal statement and the references needed to be pre-structured in some way, in order to make them more accessible and to improve fairness, especially because certain schools are able to '*play the system*' and '*write what admissions tutors want to read*'.

Examination results may not be enough

A number of HEIs reported using interviews as a mechanism for selection. The most selective universities interviewed all or nearly all prospective candidates, while in other universities some departments used interviews while others did not. Typically this was related to the demands of the subject area; for instance, interviews were common for performing arts or human science courses. Selective courses or institutions often reported using interviews in order to differentiate between applicants further than was possible through exam grades or the UCAS form alone, as illustrated by the following comments:

It is impossible to identify whether students are interested from what they say [in the personal statement]. Interviews are very important. (maths)

They have to be because of the number of applicants with 3 As. (physics)

Recruiting institutions, as well as recruiting subjects within more selective HEIs, reported using interviews as a diagnostic tool. Other participants reported using interviews to gauge whether the application was genuine. Despite the widespread use of interviews in application and admissions processes, one HEI had an institutional policy of not interviewing which participants explained as follows:

There is evidence that interviews have no effect on the conversion rate. It is difficult to assess interpersonal skills and we don't necessarily want a certain 'type' of person on the course. (physiotherapy)

It is a resource issue – financial and time constraints. Also private schools train better how to succeed in interview, so interviews disadvantage certain groups. (business)

Portfolios are important in some subject areas, especially art and design: '*It's very difficult to get evidence of what an applicant has learned creatively from exam results*'.

Participation in extra-curricular activities, including details about work experience, sporting and musical activity, charity work and gap year activities, was identified as a potential source of information for differentiating between applicants. However, participants expressed concern that opportunities to undertake such activities were not equitably distributed across the system, and that an increasingly crowded curriculum left little space for them. In particular, it was felt that the current AS assessment regime in year 12 reduced opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities compared to previous years. In addition, an instrumental approach to extra-curricular activities both at school and in HE was noted.

Additional admissions tests are already being used in many institutions and it was thought by some that these were likely to gain in popularity. However, as the following comments from participants from an FE college offering HE provision indicate, some participants were quite strongly opposed to them:

Admissions tests would put people off applying. (marketing)

Admissions tests would be dangerous for widening participation. (HE manager)

The BMAT test assesses thinking skills. These could be taught. (Arts)

The admissions test could be taught for. (general education)

14-19 educational institutions and preparation for HE

Some participants denied all knowledge of their students' prior educational experience, whereas others were able to give detailed accounts of perceived differences in students from, for example, school sixth forms or sixth form colleges and further education colleges:

The view is that sixth form prepares better, as it is a more focussed group, whereas FE colleges have to cater for a huge group with greater diversity. Also, there are more similarities between HE study and sixth form colleges than between HE study and FE colleges.

Our best students are our own Access students. This could be because of their age, or because of their course!

In schools, progression to HE is built in. In FE colleges activities such as HE visits, UCAS talks etc are optional.

On a positive note, participants from FE colleges with HE provision institutions indicated a smooth transition between FE and HE provision within the same institution, partly because of institutional continuity - '*internal applicants know how to cope*' - and partly because of opportunities for specific preparation for study at HE level. One participant compared the internal FE students with A Level students from

other institutions: '*A Level students sometimes ask nothing, but my FE route know they have to ask questions*'.

Participants felt that 14-19 educational institutions in general lacked the time to focus on progression to HE. The following comments illustrate the concerns expressed:

There is no time in the time-table for visits, taster courses and so on. HEIs need to pitch it at exactly the right point in the school year. There is no time to do anything other than what is required for the examinations.

The curriculum is full. We could do talks in schools but they couldn't fit us in.

A specific concern was expressed about the ability of pupils from independent schools to cope with a lower level of support from teaching staff, as compared with their experience at school.

Information and guidance

Focus group participants from many HEIs were concerned about the quality of information and guidance available for young people and future students. These concerns ranged from guidance about options at both GCSE and A Level, as well as options for vocational qualifications, advice related to higher education choices and future employment prospects, to more general counselling about personal and financial matters. The following comments indicate the nature of the discussions:

At 14, for example, there is little awareness of where education is taking them. There's also a need to choose GCSEs carefully at 14.

There's a problem of a lack of guidance, and the ineffectiveness of Connexions, for example.

There are concerns about advice and guidance and the extent to which students know the alternatives and the impact of choice on future entry to HE. Are they getting independent advice?

In the past, if you did three science or three arts courses, you would be accepted onto a specific degree course. Now, with a widening of choice, students find it more difficult to decide what to do. The careers advice from schools is inadequate.

In some FE colleges students study only one AVCE and think this is a passport to HE, yet they don't have GCSE maths. They are being misled by institutions and their aspirations are being raised. Guidance is an issue.

I'm worried about the financial cost to the individual of going through HE. Financial problems are very important, debt could discourage students from going to HE ... Informing students is important.

Further education colleges with higher education provision, in particular, identified a further issue – incomplete or partial advice given to young people about routes to HE:

Schools believe HE can only be accessed through A Level students only get part of the message.

There are two routes into HE – one which everyone understands, the other a black art.

Very few local sixth formers come here for HE. Schools consider us second class. There's ignorance in schools about vocational HE.

There was also concern about students lacking 'a sense of purpose' and not knowing why they wanted to progress to study at HE. Participants in one focus group in particular felt there was too much pressure on young people to go to university, and that they were not presented with alternatives:

I'm concerned that we are driving people from the age of 14 through into Higher Education. No one is saying it is okay to access HE later. Especially with fees – I'm concerned students will start but not be able to cope because they've come too early ... I'm concerned students are forced to come into HE but don't have the necessary drive. They could be put off HE for the rest of their life. (leisure and tourism)

Students are going because they think they have to – it isn't actually a positive choice. (business)

Policy change

The data collection took place between February 2005 and June 2005, which meant that the White Paper was published during the early stages of the research. There was dissatisfaction with the proposals included in the White Paper, and a perception that it did not go far enough in addressing some of the current issues in 14-19 education and training. For example:

There is a need for more confidence in government policy – this is lacking, especially after the TVEI experience. FE and HE staff need to be convinced of the value of change. The White Paper reinforced the GCSE gold standard and there is little or nothing to support 14-19 in the White Paper.

The White Paper was criticised for having missed some of the opportunities offered by Tomlinson:

Tomlinson had a cohesive curriculum model. Now, we see patches of it, a 'cherry-picking' of initiatives and a piecemeal approach. (education)

We have the status quo now – the White Paper reinforced that, and that was the one thing that Tomlinson said was not acceptable. (head of schools and community liaison)

FE colleges would have been the best place to implement Tomlinson ... It did, however, present operational challenges in implementation, but the principles were there. (art and design)

This criticism is linked with the primacy of A Levels: *What can change if the institutional cultural capital is only in A Levels?*. There was also criticism of the negativity of the A Level system as a filtering process to exclude people from HE. The system 'could enable potential to benefit from HE, rather than deselecting people. Tomlinson went some way to doing this, but could have gone further still. A Levels are inappropriate qualifications.'

Views varied on how much of a say HE should have in developing the 14-19 curriculum. These comments are illustrative:

HE is not being consulted as well as it ought to be. (social and historical sciences)

The maths A Level will be altered so it only covers 4/6 of what it did. HEIs were underconsulted. How far do academics sit on exam boards? Universities lack control. (mathematics)

Tutors go out to a range of schools, but have contact with individual schools rather than [government] organisations. In defining subject content the small number of academics who sit on exam boards are consulted, but the academic community is not consulted more widely. (life sciences)

Previous experience led some participants to view consultation with a degree of cynicism. For example:

People get cynical about consultations. We were consulted about the GNVQ and said that we'd like the individual modules to be graded, but they weren't. This makes people cynical. (admissions office)

Politicians guide where they want things to go. Consultations are ignored! (physics)

Emerging problems and paradoxes

The research indicates that HE staff identify a number of problems with the 14-19 education and training system. Frequently raised issues include the decline in the currency of A Level for admissions and selection purposes, based on the difficulty in differentiating between students with similar levels of attainment, as well as perceived problems with the effective development of content knowledge, independent study skills and intellectual sensitivity to the subjects studied for A Level.

Participants also identified certain elements of 14-19 education and training as having a negative effect on applicants and students, including over-assessment, the confusing range of vocational qualifications on offer, and the lack of time available for extra-curricular activities (particularly from 16 to 19). Weaknesses in the system were felt to have negative effects on students, including an overly-expedient approach to learning, difficulties in achieving cross-topic understanding, and decreasing self-reliance. Another recurrent problem was a perceived decline in students' linguistic and mathematical fluency, as well as their ability to apply knowledge and work with abstract concepts.

Some admissions tutors and admissions staff identified a number of problems with the admissions process, including the formulaic nature of many personal statements and references, which meant they were less useful than they might have been in the differentiation process, and the decreasing usefulness of A Level grades as a selection mechanism, an argument which applies equally to predicted and achieved grades.

Certain subject areas were highlighted as particular causes for concern, the most often cited being modern foreign languages and single science subjects. The entitlement status (as opposed to being a compulsory component of the curriculum) of modern foreign languages at 14-16 was seen as a particular problem, as well as the shortage of specialist subject teachers for chemistry and physics. The decline in languages was perceived to have serious knock-on effects, such as a slide in the take-up of Erasmus places and a negative impact on the competitiveness of UK graduates on the EU labour market.

Further analysis of the focus group data is still to be undertaken, but at this stage our research raises a number of paradoxes. First, there seems to be a mismatch between the aims and values of some lecturers at HEIs and some of their students, especially in selecting institutions. Lecturers criticised the instrumentalist approach of some students, who were open about using HE as a passport to employment, whereas lecturers had an expectation that students should be interested in learning for its own sake. However, this was also linked to students adopting a *strategic* approach to their learning.

Further, in policy terms there is a fundamental mismatch between the aims of HEIs, particularly selecting institutions, and the governments' aspiration for 50% of the cohort to enter higher education. Some participants seemed uncertain of the incremental impact of the achievement of this aspiration, and wary of the influence it would have on their student body and their work: '*There are now two sets of students, traditional academic students and the others*'; '*The 50% target forces differentiation*'.' However, other types of institution, such as FE colleges offering HE provision, are, *de facto*, responding positively to this situation by initiating links with local schools and participating in government schemes such as *Aim Higher*, and have been doing so for many years.

A further paradox is the fact that many participants criticised the perceived effects of current 14-19 education and training fairly strongly, but that many of these criticisms could be levelled at HE with equal force (for example, over-emphasis on assessment; the fostering of a 'ticket to the next stage' approach; assessment patterns which encourage reluctance to engage in learning for its own sake; students with an expedient approach to courses; the demonstration of over-reliance on teaching staff on the part of the students, and the inherent weaknesses of some modular courses and modular assessment). Some participants were aware of this paradox.

There is also the issue of mixed messages about post-16 qualifications and their currency for access to HE. A Levels remain the key entry requirement even if institutions identify problems with them; UCAS tariff points are awarded for qualifications which may not be accepted by HEIs; the national qualification framework suggests the equivalence of qualifications such as NVQs, A Levels, BTECs and so on at level 3, but they may not be viewed as equivalent by some HEIs for admissions purposes in practice.

It would also seem that there is a fundamental issue regarding the central purpose of HE. Is the main function of HE:

- o To foster knowledge for its own sake?
- o To offer students a passport to employment success?
- o To be a successful, profit-making business?

Of course, these three aims are not mutually exclusive, but participants indicate some conflict between them, especially in terms of the expectations of lecturers and students, as well as parents and employers, from 14-19 education and training and HE. The focus group conversations also reveal that HE staff are confused or undecided over the purpose of HE. Often this confusion was implicit (for instance expressed in the varying views of different participants in a focus group) but in one focus group conversation confusion over the purpose of HE was explicitly acknowledged:

Society is confused about the purpose of HE. What and who we're here for.
(access advisor)

HE has changed. Now students are customers, not students. HE has to 'serve'
its customers. We don't know what we're trying to get out of it. The
expectation used to be to produce a scholar. Now staff as well as students are
confused. (biology)

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