



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# **Curriculum 2000 Review**

## **Report on Phase 3**

**December 2003**

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Breadth in qualification take up</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Breadth in subject combinations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>VCE</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Advanced Extension Awards (AEA)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Higher Education's Response to Curriculum 2000</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Examination Timetable Changes</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Grading, Aggregation and Certification</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Key Skills</b>	<b>9</b>

## Executive Summary

1. Changes to advanced level provision were introduced in September 2000; these changes are now commonly known as Curriculum 2000. These changes have been the subject of intensive review both by QCA and a variety of other organisations, including the Nuffield Foundation (10 short reports written by Ken Spours, Ann Hodgson and colleagues), the Association of Colleges (AoC), Ofsted, the Secondary Heads Association (SHA), CCEA, ACCAC, and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA). QCA has provided the Secretary of State with two previous reports on Curriculum 2000 – in July and December of 2001. In the latter, the Authority formally committed to report again following the summer 2003 examinations.
2. This phase 3 report focuses on the extent to which the Curriculum 2000 reforms are meeting their original objectives – particularly in terms of encouraging greater curriculum breadth, the development of key skills and take-up of vocational options. The report explores the manageability of the reforms in terms of teaching, learning and assessment and the developing views of higher education.
3. Whilst considerable concerns remain amongst schools and colleges about the overall assessment load for students between the ages of 14 and 19, much of the initial disquiet about implementation, examinations timetabling and understanding of standards has declined – although there are elements that require further development and observation. The reforms have brought about modest changes in the nature and breadth of programmes studied by the majority of students. The introduction of the AS qualification has, however, made an important contribution to stimulating moves toward greater breadth of study.
4. A survey carried out by UCAS/QCA in June 2003 [the most recent of five surveys the organisations have carried out since November 2001], to which 1164 schools and colleges responded, showed strong levels of confidence about the standard required for GCE AS and A level, with 81% of teachers agreeing that teachers are confident that they know the standard required for GCE AS; and 76% at A2. Conversely, only 47% of those responding were confident about VCE standards and only 17% agreed that teachers were confident that they have the skills to deliver key skills.
5. Also in the UCAS/QCA June 2003 survey, 36% of respondents agreed that teachers are committed to the principle of greater breadth at level 3 (with 39% being neutral); 40% believed that teachers are committed to the principle of greater flexibility at level 3 (32% being neutral). However, 51% still believed that year one students were not coping well with their workload although 73% reported that their year two students are coping. There was a more mixed picture for assessment: 27% believed that the amount of external assessment for GCE is about right; 42% disagreed. Forty-five percent of respondents believed the amount of coursework in the GCE was about right, with 25% disagreeing. Many of these issues are dealt with in greater depth below.

## Breadth in qualification take up

6. One of the most important goals of *Curriculum 2000* was to afford students opportunities to expand the number and type of subjects they studied in their last two years. Patterns of examination entry in 2002-03, particularly in terms of curriculum breadth, including trends from Year 12 to Year 13 (showing which subjects students have continued to study to A level and those they have finished at AS level) were analysed and showed that in terms of breadth, *Curriculum 2000* has been a modest success.
7. The UCAS/QCA survey for 2003 shows that the number of AS levels taken by students has remained almost static and that the majority (58%) are taking four AS levels.

	No of AS	1	2	3	4	5+	Total
% of first year AS students	June 2001	5.8	5.6	26.1	58.4	4.1	100
	June 2002	5.7	6.6	27.8	56.9	3.0	100
	June 2003	5.0	6.5	28.0	58.1	2.4	100
Change 2001 – 2003		- 0.8	+ 0.9	+ 1.9	- 0.3	- 1.7	

8. Most students take three subjects to full A level. There has been a decrease in the number taking more than four A levels and an increase in the number taking only two, but the figure for those taking three has remained almost constant at 72%. (The data for June 2002 were not available. Note that the comparison between November 2001 and June 2003 may be slightly unreliable since there is likely to be some degree of attrition between November and June numbers in any year with students sometimes reducing the number of qualifications that they are studying.)

	No of A2	1	2	3	4	5+	Total
% of A2 students	Nov 2001	4.5	11.2	72.1	11.7	0.5	100
	June 2003	4.7	13.7	72.2	9.0	0.3	100
Change 2003 – 2001		+ 0.2	+ 2.5	+ 0.1	- 2.7	- 0.2	

## Breadth in subject combinations

9. Bell, Shannon and Macalava (2003), in *The Changing Pattern of A-Level/AS uptake in England* (paper presented at the BERA Annual Conference, Edinburgh, September 2003), researched breadth in terms of subject combinations using data from the summer 2002 cohort. They classified subjects into three domains: science/mathematics; social science/humanities; and arts/languages. Candidates' programmes were categorised as 'specialist' for those taking all subjects from one domain, 'partly mixed' for those taking subjects from two domains and 'mixed' for those taking subjects from all three domains. The findings are summarised in the tables below. Candidates considered in the survey were those with at least three A levels in their programmes.

	% Specialist	% Partly Mixed	% Mixed
2002 AS/A level	21	61	20
2002 A level only	35	56	9

10. The figures for 2002, which include AS qualifications, show that the fourth AS level is leading to increased breadth, although one-fifth of programmes are 'specialist'. However, the mixed programmes in the AS year are not generally being carried through to the A2 year.

	<b>% Specialist</b>	<b>% Partly Mixed</b>	<b>% Mixed</b>
2001 A level only	30	59	10
2002 A level only	35	56	9

11. The data shows a shift towards 'specialist' A level programmes between 2001 and 2002. It is possible that the breadth introduced through the fourth AS has shifted because of candidates' ability to select only their most successful subjects for continuation, which may lead them to a more specialised programme.
12. The Secondary Heads Association (SHA) reported that 69% of respondents to a survey it carried out in 2003 actively encouraged a broad range of subjects and that 60% of students in their AS year currently followed a mixed arts/science programme.

## VCE

13. The number of students taking a VCE qualification continues to rise. The figure now stands at 25% in year one and 19% in year two. Analysis of the examination entries for summer 2003 shows overall increases for all sizes of VCE (three, six and 12 units). The increases were 29% for the 3-unit award (at present only available for four subjects), 27% for the 6-unit and 4% for the 12-unit. These figures suggest that most of the increased take up is in mixed GCE/VCE programmes. There were increases in take up in all subjects for the 3- and 6-unit awards, but about half of the subjects experienced a fall in numbers taking the 12-unit award. By far the largest increases were observed in ICT for all sizes of VCE award. ICT accounted for 66% of the increase for 3-unit award and 47% for the 6-unit award. There would have been a decrease in the overall take up of the 12-unit award if it had not been for the significant increase in ICT.
14. Achievement also rose in 2003. For the double award grades AA went up from 2% to 3%; the pass rate increased from 83% to 86%. The 6-unit award saw grade A achievement go up from 4% to 6%; the pass rate increased from 79% to 83%. At AS, grade A went up from 6% to 7% and pass rates from 75% to 80%.
15. In the 2003 UCAS/QCA survey, 9% of centres that had not previously offered VCEs indicated that they intended to do so in the future. Also, 15% of centres that previously had not offered level 3 vocationally related qualifications other than VCEs indicated that they were planning to do so. A significant number of state schools were planning to switch from GCE to VCE for some students, although an equal number were planning to move away from VCE, about half back to GCE and half to BTEC Nationals. For FE and sixth form colleges, the main switches were from VCE to BTEC Nationals.

16. The Association of Colleges (AoC), in its *Curriculum 2000 Survey 2002-2003* (September 2003) reported that many institutions believed that the VCE standards were too high for some learners. 23% of colleges reported that VCE results had improved compared to legacy GNVQ Advanced level; 12% reported that results had remained the same and 41% that results had declined. However, more colleges reported improvement in retention of year one Curriculum 2000 students than reported a decline and three times as many reported an improvement in retention of year two students.
17. VCE qualifications are currently being revised to bring their structures more in line with GCE provision by introducing AS units that reflect student achievement at the end of year one. The revised qualifications are scheduled to be available for first teaching in September 2005.
18. Breadth in terms of mixing qualification types does seem to be increasing with more programmes containing a mix of GCEs and VCEs. Each year, in the UCAS/QCA survey, roughly 23% of centres have predicted an increase in the number of mixed GCE/VCE programmes.

#### **Advanced Extension Awards (AEA)**

19. The proportion of centres entering candidates for AEAs showed only a slight increase from 19.6% to 20.1%. Respondents to the QCA/UCAS survey gave three main reasons for not offering the qualification – ‘no interest in AEA/no demand’, ‘cohort ability’ and ‘no value to HE’.
20. Matched AEA/A level data from the awarding bodies on the 2002 examinations revealed that the percentage of AEA candidates who achieved a grade A at A level varied between subjects from 64% to 88%. Achievement at AEA generally reflected performance at A level. Few candidates achieved a merit or distinction if they attained grade B or lower at A level. The data was also sufficiently detailed to show that the top A candidates in terms of UMS marks generally performed better in the AEAs than the bottom A candidates.
21. At both admissions tutors seminars that QCA ran in 2002 and 2003, HE representatives stated that they were reluctant to use AEAs in offers because not all centres were making them available to students. Tutors from selective programmes and universities did admit to having difficulties distinguishing amongst the most able candidates, with some of them, especially in programmes related to medicine and some science programmes introducing their own additional tests at interview.

#### **Higher Education’s Response to Curriculum 2000**

22. The UCAS/QCA surveys for 2001-2003 reveal an increasingly negative response to the question that asked centres whether they believed that universities recognise the increased breadth in student programmes, with 57% believing that universities do not.

23. At the QCA higher education seminars in 2002 and 2003, admissions tutors gave a mixed response in this respect. Many of the recruiting institutions indicated that they did recognise breadth by allowing the UCAS points to be achieved on a wider range of qualifications, including the fourth AS and key skills. Many of the selecting institutions tended to focus on the subjects taken at A level, although some did give an alternative offer with a reduced grade requirement for applicants who had done a fourth AS.
24. Many, primarily from recruiting universities, welcomed mixed GCE/VCE programmes, and stated that VCEs had gained more currency with students and parents. On the whole, admissions tutors were not concerned about whether or not the AS award had been certificated, stating that for the most part they could get the information they needed elsewhere in the students' applications. Some did say, however, that they wished there were a consistent rule about certificating (or not certificating) the AS at the end of the first year.
25. Key skills were accepted, with qualification, by some universities, although others excluded them from their offers, even when using the UCAS tariff. There was little enthusiasm for A level general studies and only qualified support for AS critical thinking as a qualification, although most emphasised the importance of students developing and demonstrating transferable skills -- such as problem solving skills. Some universities believed that students' study skills were weaker than they had been in the past.

### **Examination Timetable Changes**

26. The impact of timetable changes on the number of examination clashes and the effectiveness of the organisation of the examination timetable in terms of sequencing of AS and A2 papers was investigated. These analyses show far fewer AS examinations clashed in 2002 and 2003 compared to 2001. Respondents to the UCAS/QCA survey and case study schools and colleges report that students who choose to sit all of their AS examinations in one session are disadvantaged. However, given that currently there is no support for extending the examination season (earlier examinations would cut even further into teaching time; later ones would compromise the awarding bodies' ability to report grades in mid-August), without altering the three unit pattern of AS, this relative disadvantage may be the price that has to be paid for minimising clashes.
27. Regarding the sequencing of the examinations, the JCGQ has surveyed schools and colleges three times about whether AS or A2 examinations should come first and each time the majority (albeit by a modest margin) asked for the pattern to remain AS followed by A2 (Northern Ireland schools all break up at the end of June and CCEA therefore schedules the A2 units first). Views, however, on the pros and cons of the current AS and A2 sequencing continue to differ; the 2003 SHA survey, with 764 institutions responding, indicated that 72% of them requested that A2 examinations should be scheduled before the AS examinations, primarily to maximise teaching time. The main problem with changing the pattern is that one cohort of students would face AS first in their first year and A2 first in their second, thus cutting short teaching time for them two years in succession.

## Grading, Aggregation and Certification

28. A detailed analysis of candidate performance has been completed using matched English candidate data from the 2001 and 2002 series of examinations and from published examination data from the Joint Council for General Qualifications (JCGQ). The 2003 matched candidate data will not be available until 2004. The analysis was carried out across five subjects: English Literature, French, Media, Physics and Psychology across the three English awarding bodies. It concentrated on grade distributions for AS and A2, grade changes between AS and A2 (A2 is not actually awarded but a nominal A2 'grade' was computed artificially from the A2 unit marks), and resit patterns. Its main findings were that:
- Candidates tend to proceed to A2 in those subjects in which they achieved their higher AS grades. Candidates who went on to complete the A level in a subject on average achieved better AS grades and those who did not. For example, in physics 17% of one awarding body's candidates were graded U on their AS awards in the summer of 2001. However, of those candidates who chose to proceed to the full A level, only 4% received a U. Similar patterns are found across all five subjects and in all awarding bodies.
  - Candidates on the whole achieve better marks in the AS half of the course, but for the majority of them their AS and A level grades are the same. For example, in English literature, if the A2 units had been graded as a separate entity, almost one third of candidates would have achieved the equivalent of one grade lower in the A2 units compared with the grade they had achieved in the AS. In practice, almost two thirds of the same candidates had the same AS and full A level grades.
  - Substantial minorities of students are re-sitting AS units once; almost no one re-sits AS units more than once. There is little re-sitting of A2 units. However, for students who do re-sit AS units, their best mark on that unit generally comes from the re-sit rather than the original sitting. For example in French, candidates re-sitting AS units once ranged between 12 and 37% (by contrast, the numbers re-sitting units twice ranged from 0 to 1%; the highest figure observed across all five subjects was 3% in a physics unit). Of those re-sitting, between 67 and 87% improved their marks from between an average of 3 to 17 uniform marks. Re-sits on A2 units in French were almost non-existent, but for Physics between 25 and 33% of candidates re-sat unit 4 (with between 50 and 70% improving their marks). This phenomenon probably stems from the pattern in the sciences of sitting the first A2 unit in January of the second year.
  - The average gain/loss per unit for each resit ranged from -2.6 uniform marks for A2 English literature unit (low numbers involved) to 17.2 uniform marks for an AS French unit. The maximum average gain was therefore equivalent to roughly one-quarter of a grade.
29. As a result of findings on resit patterns and in order to reduce the administrative burden on centres and awarding bodies, QCA advised Ministers that the restriction on resits for AS/A2 units should be removed. Centres were informed of this change on 3 October 2003.



30. The UCAS/QCA survey for 2003 showed that 40% of centres certificated all AS level students/subjects, 26% certificated some students/subjects and 34% certificated no students/subjects. The centre type with the highest percentage certificated was sixth form colleges, while the centre type with the highest percentage not certificating was independent schools. While the second most common reason given as to why centres employed a policy of certification was that 'HE values AS certification', this perception was not supported by research carried out by UCAS/QCA. That study looked into the relationship between certificating at least one AS level and the number of offers UCAS applicants received. The applicants, because they had certificated AS levels, were obliged to declare their results in section 7A of the UCAS form. Those with fewer offers on average achieved fewer UCAS points for their AS/A levels, and therefore would perhaps have been less likely to have received offers.
31. The results indicated no clear advantage for certification of AS, or disadvantage for not certificating. It seems from the survey that HE institutions were not influenced by whether applicants had certificated or not, a view supported by feedback received at the QCA HE seminars, at which some university admissions officers reported that they had been instructed not to read anything into the fact that an applicant had not certificated.
32. QCA did not recommend any changes to the rules on certification, primarily to minimise changes to the system. However, in the SHA survey, 68% of respondents indicated that they would prefer to see possibility of choice around whether or not to certificate abolished, mainly for simplicity. As seen above, some HE admissions officers concurred, expressing the view that the type of information that they would have available about all applicants would be identical.

### **Key Skills**

33. The key skills introduced in September 2000 at levels 1-4 included a new assessment model for Application of number, Communication and IT, consisting of a slightly reduced portfolio requirement and the addition of an external test. Candidates had to pass the test, and complete a portfolio to achieve the certificate. Each of these key skills was given full qualifications status. The remaining key skills of Working with others, Improving own learning and development and Problem solving, kept the status of units, and continued to be assessed via internal assessment of a portfolio.
34. In the first year there was much criticism of the new key skills. Many schools had introduced the key skills into advanced level programmes as part of the *Curriculum 2000* developments and were attempting to get students through all three key skills at level 3, at the same time as they were teaching new GCE specifications. Schools and colleges found the key skills difficult to integrate, the assessment model over burdensome, and the requirements for the three key skills much more demanding than they had anticipated. Added to this, they reported that there was little acknowledgement at that time from HE, through their offers, about the value of achievement of key skills.

35. As a result of the difficulties in this first year, the three regulatory authorities produced revised guidance on the key skills, increased the opportunities for sitting the test, and worked with awarding bodies to tailor moderation activities to help prevent clashes with other assessment activities. The overarching certificate (which required achievement of all three key skills) was removed. The Government provided guidance to centres that encouraged the achievement of at least one level 3 key skill, and thus removed the perceived requirement for students to achieve three key skills at this level. Funding arrangements were also changed. Funding from September 2001 was made available to centres for key skills development programmes, rather than just for programmes that led to achievement of the qualification.
36. The experiences in the first year and the changes made from the second year resulted in many centres reducing their key skills activity, and others withdrawing from key skills entirely. Whilst over half of the schools and colleges surveyed offer advanced level students the opportunity to take at least one of the main key skills, the proportion doing so has fallen from 72% in June 2001 to 59% in June 2003. The proportion of centres offering at least one key skill in the first year of advanced level study has fallen from 66% to 52%, and from 42% to 28% in the second year of study. Although there has been a reduction in key skill activities in schools and colleges, there is a core of centres that continues to deliver key skills, in many cases successfully integrating their delivery into students' learning programmes.
37. The June 2003 UCAS/QCA Survey found that 38% of centres were offering advanced level students the opportunity to take AoN, 50% were offering students the opportunity to take Communication, and 51% were offering students the opportunity to take IT key skills. Of those who responded positively about students pursuing key skills, 43% expected the students to achieve certification (by submitting a portfolio and passing the test); 57% expected students to develop the skills, but not go in for certification. Therefore, fewer than 25% of centres overall are expecting to certificate at least some of their students' key skills achievement.
38. A SHA survey indicated that a decrease in take up of key skills was reported by almost half of those 59% of respondents who offered key skills. An AoC survey reported that respondents found both key skills delivery and key skills testing problematical, and that 80% of colleges reported poorer achievement in level 3 key skills by students than their achievement in other qualifications at the same level. This figure dropped down to 58% at level 2. Of those colleges responding, a large majority reported that fewer than one third of their students registered for certification.
39. Statistics from the DfES Statistical First Release (May 2003) include data for the period October 2000 to September 2002, and show that the key skills qualifications are taken in a wide range of contexts, extending beyond schools and colleges running *Curriculum 2000* programmes. In that time period 296,000 key skills qualifications were awarded, 46% of them at level 2, 17% at level 3 and above. 90% of the awards were achieved by those aged 19 and under. 60% of the achievements were in colleges, and 20% in schools.

40. The UCAS/QCA survey also shows continuing concerns about higher education's response to the key skills, with 79% of respondents disagreeing with the statement "HE officers recognise key skills achievement". UCAS analysed 47,000 courses offered through its application system for the entry year 2003. Of the courses on which UCAS holds entry qualification information, 33% positively accepted key skills points as a contribution to the tariff. A subsequent analysis of 2004 entry data held by UCAS shows a substantial increase in the recognition and acceptance of key skills within higher education. Almost three quarters of higher education institutions, or 63% if analysed by courses, are prepared to count points from the key skills towards overall fulfilment of a flexible points score offer.
41. The three regulatory authorities have undertaken a review of key skills designed to address some of the problems of implementation. The review is not intended to lead to major changes to the content of the key skills. An interim report of this review was published in March 2003; the final report will be published in December 2003.
42. The specifications have been revised to assist integration of key skills assessment into main programmes of study; examples of portfolio evidence have been developed to assist centres in understanding the amount and nature of evidence required. The tests for key skills have been made more accessible for centres; level 3 tests can be taken at any of six dates in the year, and a system of on-demand testing is available for the tests at levels 1 and 2. The revised key skills will be available for use from September 2004.