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Responding to Reform: How Aware Are HE English Providers of A level

Reforms and How Have They Responded to Them?

Marcello Giovanelli, Billy Clark and Andrea Macrae

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Introduction

In September 2015, students in secondary, sixth-form and further education began A level courses in English (English Literature, English Language, and English Language and Literature), all of which had been newly modified as part of the educational reforms introduced by the coalition government in 2010. This recent modification process was part of a drive to reform school qualifications in England more generally and coincided with a range of other changes to the curriculum and assessment practices in English teaching from primary school upwards. For A level English specifications, the key changes were, in addition to revised content, a shift from a modular to a two-year linear system, the decoupling of AS and A level qualifications and a reduction in the weighting of coursework, now rebranded as Non-exam assessment (NEA) (see Ofqual 2015 for a summary of all changes following reform).

This paper reports on a survey through which we explored how far undergraduate English course providers were first, aware of this latest round of reform, and second, had made or were making changes to their programmes in light of reform. In the context of discourse around the involvement of universities in reform and the need to develop meaningful links between school and university English, we were interested

in the reality of higher education academics' awareness of and interest in post 16 study. This paper begins by outlining the context and process of A level reform before examining the importance of higher education/school relationships with regards to the curriculum and transition. We then present the findings of the survey, and following this we offer some analysis and discussion of the implications for various stakeholders.¹

The Background to reform

Since the last round of A level reform in 2008, there had been increasing discussion regarding the validity, reliability and academic rigor of the qualification, and specifically around the involvement of universities both in developing content and in providing some form of quality assurance. For example, a report by the think-tank Reform (Bassett et al. 2009), based on a survey of A level entries and interviews with academics in leading UK universities, argued that the increase in A level numbers had inevitably led towards a less rigorous system in terms of content and ultimately provided inadequate preparation for university programmes. Specifically, the report suggested that modularization, although introduced largely to bring the structure of post 16 qualifications closer to those in higher education, was responsible for students not developing wider reading and other academic skills, which were being lost in the constant, and often repeated, assessment cycle where modules could be sat multiple times during a two year course (see also Hodgson and Spours 2003: 88-89).² The report also argued that there were significant issues with question setting on English specifications in particular, which failed to encourage critical and intellectual engagement. Consequently, it was claimed that 'university English departments

struggle to undo the damage' (Bassett et al. 2009: 12). To support these claims, Bassett et al. interviewed a number of university academics who argued that current A level questions in English were far inferior in terms of their rigor than those set in the 1970s. This criticism was despite a much closer relationship existing between school and university English in terms of key emphases, for example Curriculum 2000's foregrounding of historicist approaches to literary study and the possibility of multiple interpretations of texts. It should also be noted that criticism of qualifications of previous eras is fairly common: see for example McCabe (1973) for a similar critique of contemporary English Ordinary and Advanced level questions.

The Reform report explicitly stresses the need for greater involvement for universities in the A level system thus advocating a return to a previous model where universities played a central role in devising and administering school-level qualifications (see also Petch 1953; Kingdon 1991: 33-47; Watts 2008: 41-42) and were 'responsible for ensuring that the A-level delivers the academic foundations that they [the students] need' (Bassett et al. 2009: 27). Inherent in this view is that A levels offered inadequate preparation for university English and, consequently, that universities ought to be interested and involved in post 16 study so as to mitigate what they perceived as problematic about A level studies in relation to transition (see for example Smith 2004; Smith and Hopkins 2005).

In 2010, the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government published its White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010). The white paper argued that:

A levels are a crucial way that universities select candidates for their courses, so it is important that these qualifications meet the needs of higher education institutions. To ensure that they support progression to further education, higher education or employment, we are working with Ofqual, the awarding organisations and higher education institutions **to ensure universities and learned bodies can be fully involved in their development.** We specifically want to explore where linear A levels can be adapted to provide the depth of synoptic learning which the best universities value.

(DfE 2010: 49, added emphasis)

One immediate, and influential, response to the White Paper came from Cambridge Assessment, the parent company of the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) board. Its report *A Better Approach to Higher Education/Exam Board Interaction for Post-16 Qualifications: A Policy Paper* (Cambridge Assessment 2012) offers some ways in which universities might take a leading role on the new qualifications (see also Suto et al. 2013). The report echoes many concerns of the Reform, particularly in its vision that the ‘users’ of a qualification (universities and employers) should have just as much an influential role in qualification design as the ‘producers’ (awarding bodies) (2012: 1). It recommends the reconfiguration of the purpose of A levels as explicit preparation for university and argues that the universities should show interest in qualification design and quality assurance through sustained sense of involvement and partnership.

In March 2012 Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, wrote to Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

(Ofqual), providing a rationale for more explicit university involvement in A level reform. Gove echoes the by now common criticism that the current A levels do not prepare students for university, which he views as being their primary and ‘most important purpose’ (Gove 2012: 1). Gove outlines the Government’s desire to see university involvement (specifically that of Russell Group universities) in specification design, evaluation and review and, more radically, that universities should also be responsible for ensuring standards over time in awarding and maintain a record of engagement with examination boards. Possibly as a reaction to the perception that the radical transformation of A levels in Curriculum 2000 had excluded rather than included universities (Hodgson and Spours 2033: 144), Gove sets out a vision for the university positioned at the heart of what is now branded as largely an entry qualification for undergraduate study. This new vision for university involvement implies, as we have suggested, that university academics are interested in and willing to provide their support for reform.

The process of reform

The reform process effectively began in a series of stages in the eighteen months following the White Paper. The process involved The Department for Education (DfE) producing subject content, setting out the subject knowledge, understanding and skills which need to be common to all awarding body specifications as well as some overarching principles of specification design and review. Generally, awarding bodies took this content to develop specifications with discrete stages of concept design (often taking over a year), drafting of specimen specification and assessment materials, substantial reviews through market testing with teachers and other

stakeholders, and subsequent revision of specimen assessment materials. Following these stages, materials were finally internally reviewed and amended, given a final endorsement review by stakeholders, internally approved and then finally accredited (subject to any required revisions) by Ofqual before publication for teaching.

The reform process therefore automatically had, at the stages of market testing and endorsement review, higher education involvement. At the same time, the Government's desire for increased involvement resulted in the Russell Group universities establishing the A level Advisory Content Board (ALCAB), which aimed to advise Ofqual on 'core content requirements [for A levels] considered desirable in A level facilitating subjects considered adequate preparation for our leading universities' (Thrift 2013).³ In English, the direct involvement of university academics varied across awarding bodies. For example, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) had someone with experience in higher education teaching leading their specification reform teams in English Literature, English Language and English Language and Literature. These specifications also made specific reference to QAA higher education subject benchmark statements to provide a rationale for newly defined subject content (AQA 2015a, AQA 2015b, AQA 2015c, AQA 2015d) and had supporting teaching resources for teachers co-authored by teachers and academics together with endorsed textbooks that drew more closely on the subject as studied at university (see for example Atherton et al. 2015; Giovanelli et al 2015). Prior to the main bulk of specification design, AQA also held a conference for invited university academics interested in A level reform where opinions and interest were sought to steer development. Delegates were asked to discuss the demands of developing post 16 qualifications with university transition in

mind, how qualifications could be made rigorous enough for higher education, which new areas they viewed as emerging in the discipline and how (if at all) these could be captured at A level, and the career destinations of their students in order to support an understanding of employability aspects. Equally, OCR developed a higher education consultancy forum that brought together academics to work alongside teachers and other interested parties in subject consultancy groups, including English. These groups continued after the launch of the specification and still provide a platform for discussion between secondary, further and higher education. Pearson Edexcel's specifications were prefaced by an introduction from an 'expert panel for world-class qualifications' drawn from international educators and scholars (Pearson Edexcel 2017: iv). The awarding body also produced materials for its various new English specifications that had been partly or wholly written by university academics.

The importance of school-university English partnerships

Outside of the political context surrounding A level reform, there are also good reasons why universities should be aware of post 16 curricula more generally even if a significant number of A level English students do not proceed to study English (or any subject) at university. The first is the broader issue of sixth form-undergraduate transition where the importance of students being able to successfully manage their first year is integral to future success is well documented (e.g. Tinto 1993; Lowe and Cook 2003). The transition to undergraduate study can destabilize self-identity (Scanlon et al 2007, Briggs et al 2012) and both school and university should facilitate transition in a variety of ways, including being aware of each other's subject content and making connections between the different phases visible. As Booth

(1997) demonstrates, students bring to university a subject schema derived entirely from their experience at school, which can prove a barrier to transition if higher education tutors are not aware of and do not build on this.

The need for cross-phase knowledge is evident in how a lack of knowledge can impact on student performance. For example, Smith and Hopkins (2005) identify a disconnect between what students expect in terms of their workload on undergraduate courses in English and what they actually are asked to undertake. Students significantly underestimate the amount of work, particularly independent study, that they will be expected to complete at university. Smith (2002, 2004) highlights how, as a direct result of limited dialogue between phases, students appear unprepared for the kind of academic practice they have to undertake as undergraduate English students, which is not helped by a perceived anomalies in course content and teaching style. Equally, Hodgson (2010) provides numerous examples of undergraduates commenting on the differences in culture and practice between school and university and highlighting some of the ways that A levels provided little true preparation for university study. In contrast, Goddard and Beard (2007) highlight how some students regard repetition of work across A level and undergraduate programmes as an unsatisfactory development from school to university study. In their survey of nine university academics, the same authors also report that the majority knew nothing or very little about A level content and specifications. Triangulating these data with surveys of sixth form and first year undergraduate students and schoolteachers, they conclude that lecturers knowing about post 16 study will be in a better position to understand the kinds of knowledge that students will bring with them to university and just why students might have a certain perception of what their undergraduate

studies will involve. Similarly, Hodgson and Harris (2012, 2013) argue that university lecturers should pay more attention to teaching academic literacy skills to incoming undergraduates, including the explicit outlining of subject epistemologies so as to mitigate the shock of transition from A level to undergraduate study. Green (2007), however, reports that many university lecturers continue to maintain existing approaches to teaching and learning despite previous reform of A level courses. Those who did recognize a need to change found it difficult to know how to build on what students knew in ways that would be meaningful and facilitative for them. As Green states

teachers at either sixth - form or university level continuing to teach as they have always taught, without a view to the progression of students in the process of transition, is no longer a tenable position.

(Green 2007: 130)

A final reason for partnership is that cross-phase dialogue and collegial practice will undoubtedly strengthen the subject as a whole and encourage practitioners to feel that their teaching forms part of a broader pathway through English that students undertake. Although we would argue that school and university English are to some extent inherently different by their very nature, there are continuities and commonalities and these should provide clear opportunities for practitioners from both phases to share and develop. Green (2005, 2007), for example, argues that A level study will always, to some degree, have its limitations and that universities need should adapt and change their programmes accordingly to project a sense of coherence to the discipline. Drawing directly on how higher education has shaped the nature of English in schools, Snapper (2007) outlines how A level English has been

influenced and reshaped by debates in university English with some tangible success even if such a top-down approach has not always produced completely satisfactory outcomes.

Methodology

Academics responsible who were leaders of English programmes at higher education institutions in England were invited to participate by completing a survey.⁴ A questionnaire, designed and administered using Qualtrics, was used to collect responses from those who chose to participate (n=46). The questionnaire was designed to allow questions that could measure ‘how much’ (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015: 127) respondents were aware of aspects of reform and of changes to programme content as well as provide opportunities for more qualitative analysis through extended comments.

The questionnaire had the following three sections from which data were generated.

1. *Requirements and perceived usefulness*: a question relating to which English A levels are required to access English programmes; a question on the extent to which each English A level was perceived as useful (using a Likert scale); a question that asks for the evidence used to judge perceived usefulness (participants were allowed to add responses for up to three programmes for which they were responsible).

2. *Awareness*: a question on how much awareness participants had of subject content and teaching and assessment methods in the new English A levels; a question about the source of this information; a question on the extent to which the participants perceived their colleagues to be informed about reform (using a Likert scale); a

question about the effectiveness of communications to universities regarding the changes (using a Likert scale); a question on which methods of communication were felt would be most useful in the future.

3. *Adaptation and transition*: a question that asked participants to reflect on changes made to their programmes following A level reform (none, minor or substantial); a question that allowed participants to provide details of those changes.

The data were analysed by the researchers and open text comments, where present, were manually coded. Inductive and thematic coding was used to identify trends in answers and these trends form the basis of extended discussion in the sections that follow. For the purpose of this paper, we report only on responses related to awareness and adaptation/transition. In Macrae et al. (2018), we analyse and discuss the first set of questions on requirements and perceived usefulness.

Findings

Awareness of reform

In general, participants' responses to this question demonstrated some, but largely limited, awareness of changes to A levels in English. 35% of respondents said they were unaware of any changes having taken place and where there was awareness, it tended to be around more structural aspects of reform, such as the decoupling of AS and A levels, the move to a linear examination system, and the reduction in NEA. It may be that these more 'headline' aspects of reform had been part of a more public discourse around reform and so were generally understood.

Some respondents, however, showed a more detailed and nuanced understanding of reform as indicated in the following responses which suggest a more direct involvement and engagement with the specifics of the new A level specifications as well as some consideration of implications for teaching at undergraduate level.

I'm only aware that part of the AQA English Language A level has changed to bring it much more in line with what we teach at degree level, especially when it comes to sociolinguistics.

Changes to the curricula: nineteenth century novel; Romantics and poetry; Shakespeare as a must; lack of literatures in English but a focus on English as a descriptor of a nationality.

The sources of information that respondents claimed to have drawn on were wide-ranging. For some, their sources were personal communication such as a partner or friend who was a secondary English teacher, e-mail exchanges between colleagues, and in one instance, asking first year students (presumably too late to make any changes to first year teaching). In other cases, respondents had received information from groups such as University English (the subject association for higher education English teachers), AdvanceHE (an institution representing teaching and learning more broadly in higher education) and the English and Media Centre. A number of respondents credited the media and some limited information provided by their institutions as the source of their knowledge.

It was also clear that some already had very good contacts with awarding bodies and that this had informed their understanding of reform. Two respondents actually worked for an awarding body as either an A level examiner or coursework moderator,

one had used the officially endorsed textbook to develop their understanding of the new A level English Language specification, two indicated that they had attended stakeholder conferences early in the reform process and three mentioned extended contact with one awarding body (AQA). One respondent, in particular, felt very well informed due to working with awarding bodies over time, which had provided a good understanding of changes.

I was a consultant and liaised with a member of two exam boards over changes to A level assessment reform process

The extent to which respondents felt their colleagues were informed also varied. Largely it was felt that colleagues had limited information on and awareness of changes to A levels, with 65% of respondents choosing ‘partially informed’ or ‘a little informed’. Not one respondent felt that their colleagues were ‘highly informed’.

Figure 1 shows the response to this question.

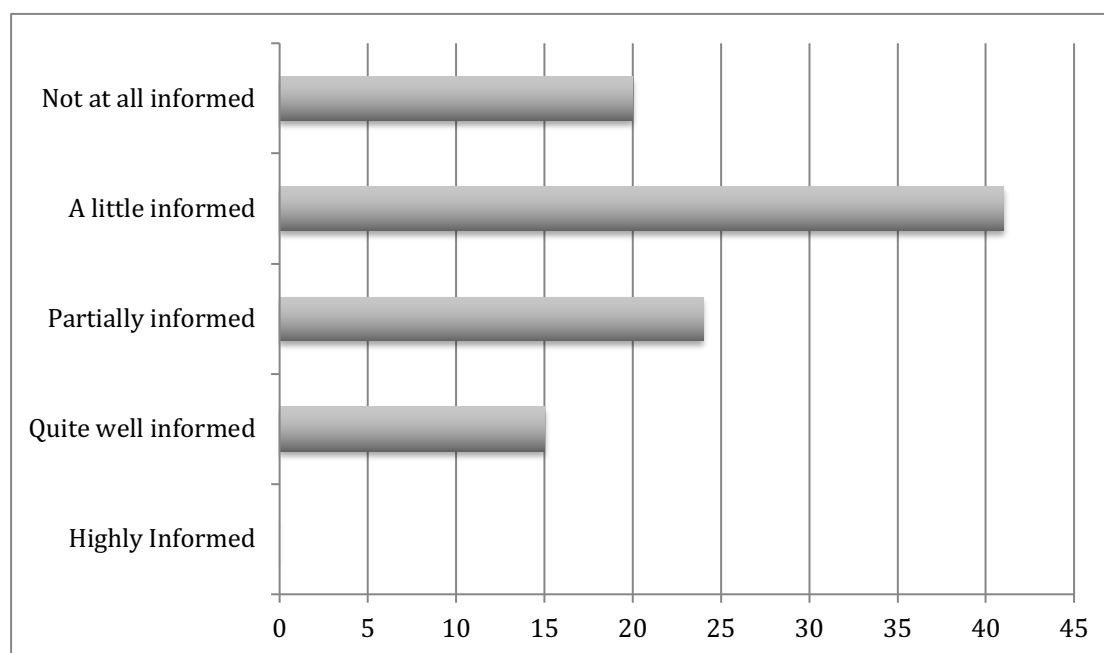


Figure 1: How informed do respondents think their teaching staff are about the changes to the A levels? (%)

Respondents provided an equally bleak picture about the perceived effectiveness of communications to universities regarding A level reform (Figure 2), with nearly 55% outlining that communication to universities had not been effective.

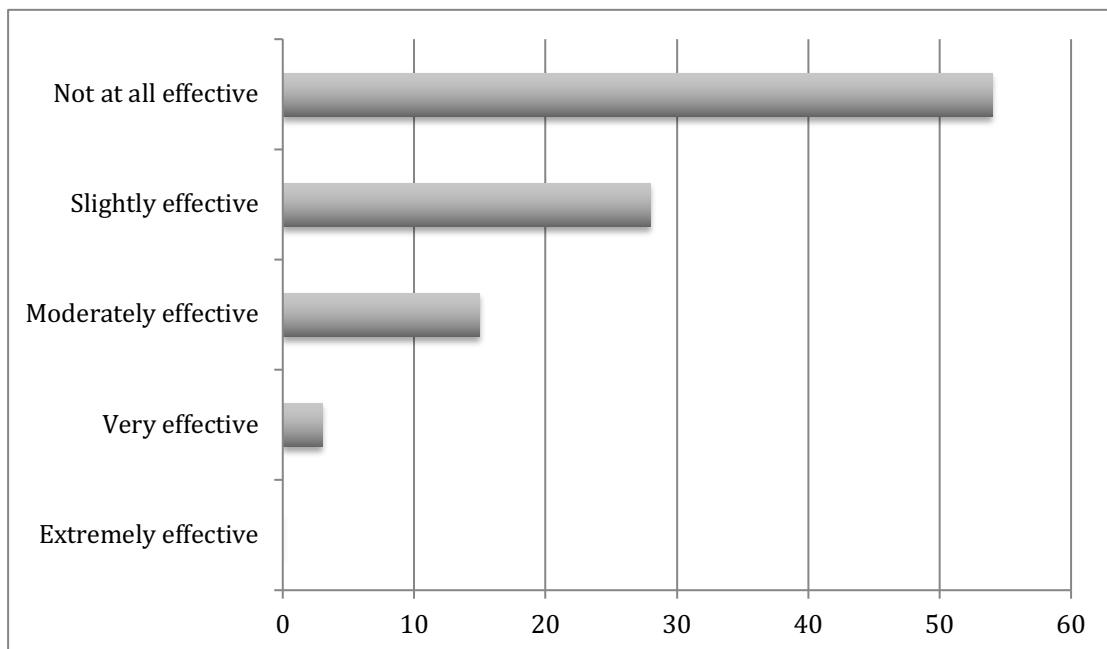


Figure 2: How effective do respondents feel communication about the A level reforms has been (%)

Respondents indicated a number of ways that they would like to be informed and notified about A level reform in the future. Many said that regular e-mail communication between awarding bodies and universities both during and after specification reform would be useful, although there were some concerns regarding how feasible this would be and the extent to which messages would be clearly disseminated to those in need of the information. Many believed the awarding bodies

themselves should pay a much greater role in making universities involved in and aware of changes. For example, two respondents suggested that

Regional talks would be useful preferably from the exam boards themselves.

It would be very useful to hear staff from the exam boards speak about these reforms in a forum that allows for questions from University Staff. Input from A Level teachers at such an event would also be very valuable.

It was also felt that some kind of mediated document from a trusted institution would be useful for university teachers. Suggestions included the Linguistics Association of Great Britain, the Higher Education Academy and University English, notably all higher rather than secondary/further education bodies. Despite the general lack of awareness noted in previous responses, comments here stressed the importance of awareness in order to support curriculum development and understand incoming student need in more detail. As one respondent explained:

[We need] active and constructive communication which aims to inform with an effective timeline. We are in need to know what they believe studying English means and how the discipline is approached and assessed. It would help us welcoming first-year students; reducing their anxiety and ensuring there is effective communication when we discuss the discipline and its topics.

Adaptation and transition

Overall, over half of the respondents indicated that they had not or were not currently making changes to their programmes following A level reform, with only 13% indicating that they had made or would be making substantial changes. These results,

shown in Figure 3, are unsurprising given the responses to questions which focused on respondents' awareness and understanding of those changes.

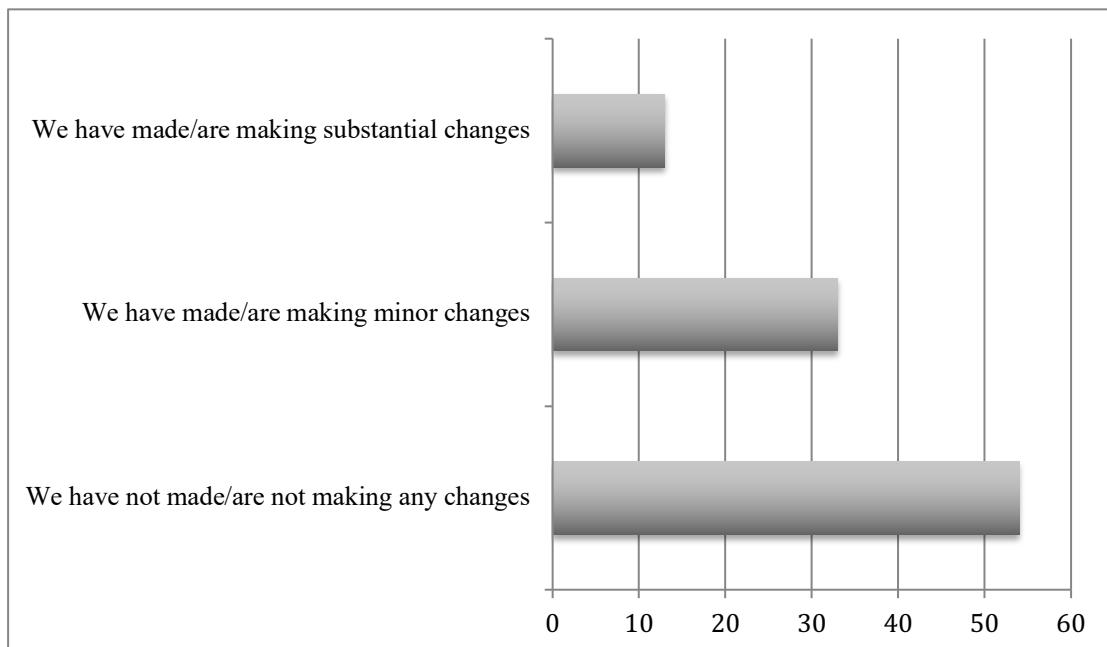


Figure 3: To what extent have your programme teams changed programmes to support the transition of students who have taken the reformed A levels? (%)

Where respondents indicated that they had made minor changes, these tended to be in either aspects of additional content or in re-configuring assessment structures in the light of revisions to A level specifications. In some cases these were as a result of a perceived gap in incoming students' subject knowledge, as in this example.

[...] students need revision of basic concepts and [we can] not assume they come equipped with this knowledge; however, finding out from students what knowledge they do have to be able to grade the content in some ways, be led by the students.

Some respondents identified particular topics in the curriculum that they felt needed more explicit teaching in the first year as a result of A level reform. The teaching of

grammar, literary theory and a more extensive introduction to and contextualisation of non-canonical, non-English literature were highlighted as explicit examples of areas that institutions had decided to embed more carefully on their first years programmes. In other cases, respondents indicated that they needed to be more wary of developing students' independent study and reading skills. Although this gap was not articulated as a direct result of A level reform, the fact that respondents claimed to be making changes based on reform suggested that they thought aspects of the new A levels did not prepare students well enough for undergraduate study. As one respondent wrote:

[We need] more student support, especially in terms of tutorials, and availability of Study Skills information and transmission. More is needed - or a change in the A levels!

The shift to a greater focus on examinations at A level (as well as at GCSE) was also highlighted as influencing impending changes to the kinds of assessments at undergraduate level. The reduced variety of assessment at A level and the reduced emphasis on extended independent writing meant that one institution had introduced

[...] more varied assessment including working towards the writing of an independent extended academic essay with less expectation that students would already know how to do it.

Those respondents who had indicated that more significant changes had or were being made to their programmes drew attention to similar aspects. Another respondent seemed to be reacting to A level reform by saying that their institution would be widening the scope of literature taught to first years to include a greater range of world literature, and developing more applied approaches to literary study, for example by asking students to examine the role of reading practices in communities

and work within digital humanities. Another indicated that their programme had increased the chronological span of modules and included a wider range of multicultural texts. Another respondent argued that the change and emphases in A level assessment practice with the a greater emphasis on examinations and a reduction in independent coursework were ironic since

HE has spent a decade being told to vary its assessment methods and include more formative feedback.

The perceived shift in assessment practice at A level resulted, for some, in greater focus on developing extended and independent writing skills including general research and academic practice skills which, it could be argued, have been downplayed at least in their relative weighting in revised A level English specifications.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate two main issues surrounding knowledge of A level reform and university involvement in the post 16 curriculum. First, it is clear that despite the vision and intentions early in the reform process, university involvement in A level reform was not what the Government hoped it would be. The responses to our survey indicate that, with some notable exceptions, respondents' general limited awareness of reform suggested a lack of involvement in the process. However, it should be noted that, as we have previously indicated, awarding bodies did provide opportunities for university academics to become involved in different ways in the reform process and

it may be that our survey has not captured all involvement. Since our respondents were those with responsibility for leading English undergraduate programmes, this raises questions regarding who might be best placed to support awarding bodies in reform, and how, where there is involvement, learning from development is passed back up so that it has a positive effect on undergraduate programmes.

Of course, one issue might be the extent to which university academics can afford to give time to partnership work and the ways that this can be facilitated. Some respondents in our survey had clearly managed to develop roles with awarding bodies over time but for others it was less obvious how this could be managed or indeed how such partnerships might be established. It is clear that for universities to be involved, such an involvement needs to be perceived as attractive and mutually beneficial, with clear guidelines around levels of time and commitment and funding arrangements (Cambridge Assessment 2012: 4-5).

The issue of cross-phase knowledge can be addressed in different ways and it should be noted that university academics can develop awareness of reform without necessarily being involved in the process of reform itself. For example, in our survey one respondent remarked on how their institution had approached an A level examiner to talk to the department about the reform process. The examiner had also led a session on A level teaching and learning more generally which had led to beneficial changes being made to the department's programmes and an awareness of the kinds of knowledge students are likely to bring with them from A level to undergraduate study. This kind of direct learning can be reciprocated and may take other forms; for example, Ballinger (2002) draws on a case study where university

academics visited schools and observed A level lessons as a way of developing their understanding of subject content and pedagogy at post 16.

A better focus on transition issues and cross-phase dialogue would also, of course, benefit school and sixth form/further education college teachers in developing their own subject knowledge, particularly for A level English Language and A level English Language and Literature since teacher confidence in these subjects is typically relatively lower than in English Literature (Goddard and Beard 2007; Clark et al. 2015; Giovanelli 2015). Finally, such a partnership would support the content of university English by promoting a view of the subject that builds from the bottom-up so that the interests and content work at post 16 can be viewed as an important driver of reform in undergraduate content. The success of English Language as a degree subject distinct from linguistics can in part be attributed to its relatively recent growth as a viable A level course, driven primarily by a grass-roots movement of teachers interested in a more sociological framing of language, and then consequently by increasing numbers of students wanting to continue their studies at undergraduate level (see Scott 1989; Goddard and Beard 2007).

The second issue that arises from the survey is about how specific changes to qualifications are disseminated to universities post reform. Our findings show that generally respondents felt that changes to content and assessment in A levels in English had not been communicated effectively enough and there were a number of suggestions as to how this might be improved in the future (e.g. direct contact, talks and conferences, mediated documents). We suggest that one way in which awarding bodies themselves might facilitate better communication is to develop materials

specifically for higher education colleagues as part of their tailored resource package that follows the publication and launch of A level specifications. These could mirror the style of resources that are produced by other organizations (see for example Cushing et al. 2015, for the National Association for the Teaching of English) while being more clearly focused on highlighting issues that are relevant for the higher education community of English teachers. We would also argue that there need to be greater opportunities for awarding bodies and school and university teachers to come together more generally to discuss the implications of any changes to curricula and consider ways in which they could support each other. Although areas of good practice do exist, our findings show that there is a desire amongst university teachers to have more structured and easily identifiable channels of communication and fora to develop their understanding of change so as to consider the implications of reform for their own practice.

Conclusion

It is clear from our research that more work needs to be done to improve university English departments' knowledge of A level reform, and more generally to secure a better understanding of post 16 English so that this can inform their own provision on undergraduate degree programmes. Despite one of the headline drivers behind the latest round of reform being the involvement of universities, our results suggest that, in English at least, the picture is one of inconsistency regarding knowledge of the new A levels. Equally, although university providers appear to be making changes to support students' transition to university, these are generally not made with awareness or particular consideration of A level content and assessment methods. We believe

that in the wider context of a decrease in the number of students taking A level English and applying for undergraduate programmes in English together with anxieties over the nature of GCSE reform in the subject (Bleiman 2017) it is imperative that the subject community as a whole engage in some joined-up thinking so as to develop a better sense of cohesion and coherence across the phases. Although some fruitful work in this area exists, for example the conferences for teachers that we run as part of our *Integrating English* conference⁵, the 2017 *English: Shared Futures* conference, and work done by organisations such as the English and Media Centre who consistently attempt to encourage dialogue between teachers in different phases of English, there is clearly much more that could, and should, be done to facilitate continued effective joint action.

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Notes

1. Although our focus here is on the reformed A levels, we are aware students that might take other post 16 qualifications e.g. the international baccalaureate.
2. The 2004 Tomlinson report recommended that there should be a reduction from six to four modules. This came into effect following the 2008 reform of A levels.
3. The facilitating subjects according to the Russell Group were Mathematics, Further Mathematics, English Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History, and modern foreign and classical languages. Ultimately, ALCAB set up panels and consulted in

three areas: Mathematics, Geography and modern foreign and classical languages, with minimal if any real input into the reformed English A levels. The body was suspended in 2015.

4. The programmes targeted in our research were those including degrees with titles such as English Studies, English Literature, English Language, Linguistics, Comparative Literature, etc. and combinations thereof, but excluding English in combination with other subjects (e.g. English and History) except for combinations with Creative Writing, and excluding broader/related degrees (e.g. Communications and Media).

5. See www.integratingenglish.org for details.

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