

POLICY WATCH

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The 1994 Group of universities comment on the 14 - 19 reforms

Another week another chorus of comments about 14 - 19 developments but this time with a difference. Firstly, the comments come from a new angle, the 19 "small - medium sized universities" that constitute the 1994 Group. And secondly they are not fixated on Diplomas but cover some other aspects of the 14 - 19 reform programme as well, namely the new GCE A* grade and the Project. And the verdict? It depends how you unpack statements like "*the reforms are seen both by senior staff and admissions tutors neither to prejudice nor run counter to the future direction of undergraduate education being mapped in 1994 Group universities*" - wait and see perhaps?

The research for this Report, which was jointly funded by the DCSF and carried out between June and November last year, involved each of the 19 universities in some form either through interview or questionnaire. Three main themes emerged which arguably form the criteria against which their views should be judged: what impact will the changes have first on the employability of their graduates, second on widening participation and third on getting a better 'fit' between applicant and university/course?

As for the three features of the 14 - 19 reform programme under the microscope - the A*, the Extended Project and Diplomas - these were deliberately selected as the reform features most critical to this particular group of universities.

Some of the headlines have attracted media comment, inevitably perhaps the most stark, such as '37% of tutors express concern about the A*,' (it could lead to a "narrowing of the applicant's academic base" to quote one.) Other concerns highlighted were about the rigour of the assessment for the Extended Project and most high profile of all, 36% of tutors saying that it "*was not at all likely*" that they would accept Diploma applicants on to courses where there is a clear link in content. 48% incidentally said it was "*very likely*."

Such comments need to be seen of course in the round. For example, on the GCE A*, while some tutors expressed concern, others felt it would greatly help in admissions decisions. The issue at stake here is how to differentiate between the top candidates. Last summer, for the first time, over a quarter of entries gained an A grade. Under the A*, if the bar remains at 90% across two or more A2 units, there will be, by 2010, a more manageable 29,000 of students with at least one A*, 11,000 with 2 A*s and 3,500 with 3 A*s. English, Drama, Law, History, Maths, Business Studies, Medicine and Dentistry were all cited as courses for which the A* might be used for admissions purposes. It will be interesting to see if this has any impact on the proliferation of alternative courses or entry tests for many of these subjects. Most of the courses listed are what's called 'selecting courses' where demand exceeds supply and candidates have a hatful of A grades. On that basis, the A* may prove to be a useful filter although two courses, Law and Medicine, indicated that they would continue with entry tests for the foreseeable future.

The reliability of the assessment apart, most reactions to the second aspect of 14 – 19 reform consulted on – the Extended Project – were favourable. The Project has the potential to develop the sorts of independent research skills universities seek. That in itself is valuable but will it also help in admissions' decisions? In answer to the question, *"where applicants have completed an Extended Project, we are likely to use this as a specified element of the entry requirements of the course,"* 56% replied *"No"* although more, 72%, said they might use it in borderline cases. There is a part of the sixth form curriculum, currently populated by General Studies, Critical Thinking, the IB Extended Essay and so on, that brings more value to students than is often recognised. Hopefully the Project will add to that. The worry at the moment, revealed in some replies, is that it might add further to the gap between schools; some will have the capacity to do it better than others.

But perhaps inevitably it was Diplomas that attracted most comment. Many need to be seen in context. For instance, the Report notes that *"Diplomas relate strongly to existing areas of weak supply among well qualified applicants. In 2007, 29 of the Russell and 1994 universities entered courses in Clearing that related to the content of one or more of the first 5 Diplomas."* This could be viewed in one of two ways. Diplomas are already being perceived as alternative forms of entry for 'weaker' candidates or Diplomas provide a real opportunity to fill courses from a different 'talent pool.'

These are the main themes that emerged about Diplomas.

First that the match between the Diploma content in the first 5 lines and current undergraduate courses is mixed with concerns notably about some of the focus of the IT Diploma and the maths in the Engineering Diploma. A general concern is how far the level of skills developed in Diploma programmes will be 'strong' enough for some undergraduate courses. *"Our degrees are very theoretical"* said one tutor, *"I would worry about how the students would cope with this, having previously engaged in such practical studies."* **Second** that at this stage, there appear to be few concerns about the methods of assessment being proposed for the Diploma, the mix of methods was regarded as *"suitable."* **Third** that few universities as yet have a specific policy on Diploma admissions but most will in time for entry for the 2010 cohort. Some might specify particular conditions alongside, most would be cautious in the first instance but significantly, *"if institutions' initial experiences with Diploma students were generally negative then that would have implications for the recruitment in subsequent years."* First impressions will be important.

Fourth that many tutors were still unclear about the nature of Diplomas, they wanted re – assurance about its *'relative academic standard.'* In the face of such uncertainty they were likely to treat Diploma applicants as they might applicants from BTEC courses; *"we will view this (the Diploma) in a similar way to the established BTEC Diplomas."* **Fifth** that there were mixed views about which particular courses they would like to see under Additional and Specialist Learning. If in doubt, most would resort to traditional qualifications, *"a particular A level or at least, an A level in a relevant subject"* as one tutor explained. **Sixth**, and it may be that the question was not put, no one seemed to mention functional skills.

There is however one final message that stands out and it can be found in para 126; *"an important message from many of our respondents is that the reforms will need to live up to their promise."* Not sure which promise they mean but plenty have been made.

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