

A LEVEL REFORM AND HIGHER EDUCATION INVOLVEMENT

A REPORT FROM THE UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS AND TRANSITION
INTEREST GROUP



One of the agenda items for our 2011 meeting was 'Ofqual and its relevance for higher education' and our discussion around the topic was reported in the minutes as casting light on 'a somewhat remote, but nonetheless useful connection' between A level and university study. One year on and the regulator is anything but remote to schools and universities and a good proportion of this summer's meeting was devoted to considering its current A level consultation and, in particular, its implementation of 'new ways of involving higher education in determining A level content' (Ofqual's Corporate Plan 2012-15, p.9).

Some members attending the meeting had already been involved in key stages of Ofqual's consultation process and were able to inform the group of developments to date. One had led the English review panel for the regulator's recent International Study (available to read in full on Ofqual's website) and reported that A level English Literature had come out as one of the most traditional of the dozen or so qualifications under comparison, especially in terms of content. Although it was found to prepare students very well for some types of university English courses, it was not felt to suit the broad range of university English courses currently on offer, not least in its separation of language and literature study. Yet while the English Language and English Literature A level qualification would seem to offer a more suitable foundation for some of today's English degree courses, the feeling in the meeting was that the English Literature A level remains the qualification of choice for admissions.

Another member of the group had participated in Ofqual's A Level Validation Group and tabled the document 'Fit for Purpose?' which outlines the conclusions drawn from Ipsos Mori's research into perceptions of A Level. This provided a number of points for discussion: the high-stakes nature of A levels and the impact of this on teaching and learning; the continuing dissatisfaction with the marking

of A level English Literature; and the short time allowed for AS study compared to A2 (often exacerbated by centres failing to heed the stipulated 180 'guided learning hours' for the qualification). While the sixth-form teachers present were completely in agreement with these points, they were also at one in feeling that the 2008 curriculum combines rigorous examination units with freedom of choice in the coursework units, and that it has proven really enjoyable for students and teachers alike.

The current review of the AS qualification looks set to bring about considerable change and it is possible that the weighting of AS/A2 will move from 50/50 to 40/60, a shift that was felt to be a sensible one. Views were rather more mixed regarding whether or not AS should continue to be part of the qualifications framework. While some teachers prefer the teaching and learning pace of a linear qualification, the current structure remains popular with universities, as UMS scores offer a fairly reliable indication of how a candidate is likely to perform at A2. Given that there is no longer the prospect of a PQA system, AS results look set to continue to play a significant part in the admissions process. In terms of changes already underway, members welcomed Ofqual's limiting of resits to one per qualification and the ending of January assessments (both from 2013). Likewise, they approved of the moves currently afoot to curtail costly training events offered by Awarding Organisations, as well as publications endorsed by them.

One agenda item which seemed to endorse the Special Interest Group's *raison d'être* was that concerning higher education's involvement in A level. Colleagues attending from the university sector reported that they had not yet been consulted about such involvement and they were somewhat dubious about whether institutions would have the time or resources to invest in such an initiative. Rising student numbers and increasing demands for contact time and for speedier

return of written work was putting considerable strain on lecturers' time and research activities. In addition, the diverse nature of English courses offered by UK universities could make reaching a consensus on core content for A level English Literature problematic. It was thought that university education departments would be more likely to welcome involvement in A level reform and that they would also have the relevant expertise in assessment; unfortunately, the current policy of transferring more and more teacher training to schools meant that they were receiving less funding and reducing in size as a result. Some members of the group who were unable to attend the meeting were rather more positive about participating in A level assessment and, indeed, had already contributed to events run by Ofqual and the DfE. It was noted at the meeting, however, that while consultation events were being run, no substantial funding for those keen to take part was forthcoming and the expense of

travel could prove a considerable disincentive.

Over the next few months, separate meetings are being held by Ofqual for 'Schools and Colleges' and the 'Higher Education community'. Organizing events in this way serves to reinforce the already wide gap between schools and universities and cuts off the opportunity for what could be highly thought-provoking and informative cross-sector debate. Nonetheless, the Special Interest Group will press on regardless in its aim to foster close links between sectors. We are launching our own newsletter in October of this year, which will give a brief summary of developments in both secondary and higher education, as well as announcing forthcoming events related to the transition from A level to undergraduate English study. Fingers crossed that this might go some way to ensuring that, if only once a term, the twain *shall* meet.

Jenny Stevens

THE ENGLISH 4-11 PICTURE BOOK AWARDS

The shortlist for the 2012 awards for the best books of 2011 appeared in the Spring issue of the Newsletter. All the shortlisted books featured in a special window and in-store display at The Reading Shop—a specialist children's bookshop in Oadby, Leicestershire, where the winners were announced on April 3rd.



Sue Wicks (l) and Lynn Moore from the Reading Shop hold the four winning books after the announcement. To find out who won, go to page 14.

