

## English after the post-2015 A level Reforms: HE Prerequisites and Perspectives

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### Abstract:

This article reports the results of a survey of UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) providers of undergraduate degree programmes in English. The survey solicited HEI providers' views on how well each of the A levels in English prepares students for degree programmes, and asked which of the three A levels are included in the entry requirements for those programmes. The survey also asked how far HEI providers were aware of the post-2015 reforms at A level, and what changes had been made to programmes in response to those reforms. After outlining the rationale and methodology of the survey, this article discusses the data, focussing on prerequisites and perceptions of relative usefulness. Findings include: a significant proportion of programmes for which no A level in English is required; mixed perceptions of the usefulness of the A levels; and a need for more cross-phase dialogue around A level content and teaching methods.

**Keywords:** A levels, higher education, reform, transition, survey

### Introduction

In December 2017 and January 2018 the authors conducted a survey of all UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) providers of undergraduate degree programmes in English. One aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of the views of HEI providers on the relationship between each of the three General Certification of Advanced level qualifications (A levels) in English (English Language, English Literature, and English Language and Literature) and their individual programmes in English. Specifically, the survey was designed to discover HEI providers' views on how well each of the three A levels in English prepared students for their individual HEI English courses, and to investigate which of the three A levels are included in the entry requirements, as prerequisites or alternative prerequisites, for their individual HEI English programmes. Responses to these questions were provided in relation to 68 distinct degree programmes by 49 academics responsible for undergraduate programmes in English (e.g. course directors) at different universities, with a roughly even split between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions (UK institutions which gained university status through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act). Further aims of the survey were to measure how far HEI providers were aware of the post-2015 reforms at A level which restructured the curriculum, and what changes were being made to programmes in response to those reforms. Some of the data on awareness and programme adaptations is touched on below, but more detailed discussion of responses to this part of the survey is reported and analysed in (Giovanelli, Clark and Macrae, under review). After outlining the context, rationale and methodology of the survey, this article describes and

discusses the data on prerequisites and on perceptions of the relative usefulness of each A level in relation to degree programmes.

### **Transition from post-16 to HE English**

There are three distinct A levels in English: English Language, English Literature, and English Language and Literature. Students entering university to study English may have taken any one of these, potentially two (English Language and English Literature), or potentially none, as will be discussed below. In England, five different A level specifications are offered in the A level in English Literature, four in English Language and Literature, and four in English Language. While the Assessment Objectives (AOs) are shared by each specification, the relative weighting of these AOs differs across the specifications, and there are other significant variations between specifications. For example, one English Literature specification offers only closed book examinations, while another offers only open book examinations, and some specifications focus on and are organised around theme and period, while others focus on and are organised around genre and theory. In addition, rather than A levels, some students of English at UK HEIs will have taken Scottish Highers, Advanced Highers or the Scottish Baccalaureate, the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced, the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, the Cambridge Pre-U, BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council qualifications), the Extended Project Qualification or qualifications from other countries. The A levels in Wales and Northern Ireland are also slightly different, with reforms being undertaken later than in the English counterparts. Therefore, any two students starting a degree in English may have different background knowledge in and experience of the subject.

The kinds of English courses students take at university can also vary significantly. ‘English’ is a main descriptor of courses as varied as those focussing purely on (and sometimes titled) ‘English Literature’ and those focussing purely on (and sometimes titled) ‘Linguistics’, and everything in between, including those which combine various aspects of English (sometimes, but not always, titled ‘English Studies’ or just ‘English’). The variety at both the post-16 and HE phases creates a complex post-16-to-HE transition context for English Studies and this can pose challenges for both students and lecturers.

The timing of this survey was motivated by a significant further complicating factor in the transitional context. In September 2015, students in England began newly reformed versions of the three A level courses in English following government-led changes to school curricula (see Cushing, Giovanelli and Snapper (2015) for a summary of the reformed A levels in English). In autumn 2017 some of the students who had taken these reformed A levels arrived at UK universities to take undergraduate degrees in English. The survey explored HEI providers’ perceptions of the A levels, but did not specify which version of the A levels (pre-2015 or post-2015) responses might relate to: the data on perceptions and prerequisites is valuable regardless of whether or not the respondents were familiar with the most recent iteration of the A levels in English (not least as the post-2015 A levels contribute to the background of up to a maximum of only one third of whole undergraduate student cohorts). Awareness of the reforms was addressed later in the survey.

## Methodology

In December 2017 and January 2018 we invited academics responsible for of English undergraduate programmes (e.g. course directors) at all UK HEIs to participate in a survey. The survey was designed and administered using Qualtrics and involved a mix of multiple choice, Likert scale and extended text comment questions, capturing a blend of quantitative factual and qualitative attitudinal data. The authors analysed the data and manually coded the comments to identify trends in responses.

The questionnaire solicited data on three topics:

1. *Requirements and perceived usefulness*: Participants (n=49) were asked to respond to three questions on up to three programmes; a multiple choice question asking which A and/or AS levels in English are prerequisites or alternative prerequisites for that programme; a question asking to what extent each of the three A levels are perceived to be useful in preparing for that programme (using a Likert scale); and an open text comment question asking what kinds of things informed respondents' views regarding usefulness.
2. *Awareness*: participants (n=46) were asked what changes to subject content and assessment methods they were aware of having been made in the A level reform process; what sources of information facilitated that awareness; the extent to which respondents' believed their colleagues to be aware of the reforms; how effective communications to universities had been regarding the reforms; and which methods of communication would be most useful in future.
3. *Adaptation and transition*: participants (n=46) were asked what level of changes had been or were being made to their degree programmes following the A level reforms (none, minor or substantial); and were asked to describe any minor or substantial changes.

### **The status of each A level in English as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite for HEI UG English programmes**

Universities' choices about which of the three A levels in English are prerequisites or alternative prerequisites for their degree programmes may often influence students' choices about which A levels to take. We asked respondents to specify which of the A levels in English was a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite for each degree programme in English that they led (in relation to up to three programmes). By prerequisite, we mean the student must have taken the A level in X; by alternative prerequisites, we mean, for example, the student must have taken at least one of the A level in Y and the A level in Z.

The responses were interesting, and in some ways unexpected. For 28% of the 68 programmes, any one of the three A levels in English was a prerequisite; that is, it did not matter which particular A level in English students had taken, as long as they had taken one of them. However, many respondents did list specific A levels as prerequisites or alternative prerequisites: 56% specified the A level in English Literature (henceforth 'the Literature A level') as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite; 43% specified the A level in English Language and Literature (henceforth 'the Lang-Lit A level'); and 32% specified the A level in English Language (henceforth 'the Language A level').

Respondents could list multiple A levels and AS levels in their responses. The responses therefore do not signal that, for example, students taking the Lang-Lit A level are excluded from the 56% of the 68 degree programmes for which the Literature A level was specified as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite: a significant proportion of those programmes were also among the 43% of programmes which specified the Lang-Lit A level as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite. These responses simply capture how many times each A and AS level is specifically included within requirements.

Significantly, for 4% of the 68 programmes, only an AS level in any one of the three English subjects was a prerequisite, and, perhaps surprisingly, 38% did not require students to have taken any of the three A or AS levels in English. This is pertinent as a 'bridge' between A level and BA/BSc level in English is arguably not relevant if no subject-specific A level knowledge is expected.

11 out of the 68 programmes stipulated the Literature A level as the only prerequisite, with an even split across post- and pre-1992 institutions. This means that for 11 of the programmes, students who had not taken that A level would not be accepted (in all but exceptional cases). In comparison, three out of 68 programmes stipulated the Language A level as the only prerequisite and none stipulated the Lang-Lit A level as the only prerequisite. The Literature A level is the only one of the three A levels in English to have 'facilitating subject' status – that is, to be among the list of 8 subjects at A level which are defined as 'a challenge' by the guide produced by the Russell Group (24 research intensive UK universities) (Russell Group 2017/18a, 30) and which keep 'a much wider range of options open to you at university' (28). The guide does go on to contradict this slightly, stating that the 'essential advanced level qualifications' for 'English' are 'English Literature or combined English Language and Literature (some courses will accept English Language)' (40). The Russell Group website clarifies:

In our list of facilitating subjects, English refers to English Literature. However, individual universities will have their own admissions policies, and entrance requirements will vary by courses within institutions. In general, English Literature or a combined English Language and Literature course is required at advanced level for entry to study English at university. A few universities will also accept English Language without a Literature qualification. (Russell Group 2017/18b).

Nonetheless, the Russell Group guide states that some university courses require students to have studied one or more facilitating subjects at A level (Russell Group 2017/2018a, 27), and states that 'if you decide not to choose one or more of the facilitating subjects at advanced level, many degrees at competitive universities will not be open to you' (29). Though conflicting in parts, this guidance may encourage school students to choose the Literature A level over the other two English A levels (unless they are clear at that point that they want to study Linguistics, in which case another facilitating subject plus the Language A level could be considered sensible), and/or may encourage teachers to advise students along these lines. However, our data suggest that, in

reality, relatively few English courses require the Literature A level specifically. In addition, roughly half of the 38% of the 68 programmes for which no A or AS level in English is required are at pre-1992 universities, and so some are possibly Russell Group institutions.

### **The perceptions of academics responsible for HEI UG English programmes on the relative usefulness of each A level in English in preparing students for UG English programmes**

The choices universities make in deciding which of the three A levels in English are prerequisites or alternative prerequisites for their undergraduate courses in English tend to be determined by at least three factors: the relative level of challenge the A level provides for the student (e.g., historically the Literature A level has generally been perceived to be the most challenging, irrespective of specification); relatedly, whether or not the A level is a ‘facilitating subject’; and which of the A levels provides students with the most appropriate and useful knowledge, understanding and skills in that subject with respect to the specific content and nature of the undergraduate programme.

The survey asked HEI English course directors about the relative usefulness of each of the three A levels in preparing students for their degree courses. Respondents were asked to provide one response per A level, and to choose from ‘most useful’, ‘moderately useful’, and ‘not very/not at all useful’. Respondents could rank two or more A levels as equally useful (i.e. two could be equally ‘most useful’, all three could be equally ‘moderately useful’, etc.).

The Literature A level was ranked as the ‘most useful’ most frequently (that is, for the highest number of degree programmes). This tallies with the Literature A level being specified as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite for the highest number of courses. However, the Language A level was ranked as the ‘most useful’ for the second highest number of degree programmes, very closely followed by the Lang-Lit A level. This might appear to run counter to that fact that the Lang-Lit A level is stipulated as a prerequisite or alternative prerequisite for more degree programmes than the Language A level. However, two further details warrant consideration: the Language A level was ranked as the ‘most useful’ for degrees in English Language and in Linguistics, and the Lang-Lit A level was ranked as ‘moderately useful’ for the highest number of degree programmes in comparison to both of the other A levels. This suggests that, amongst other things, the Lang-Lit A level is considered valuable, and perhaps especially so for students who are not sure, at the point of choosing their A levels, which kind of degree course in English they might want to take.

Respondents were asked about what kinds of sources of information had shaped their views on their perceptions of how well each A level prepared students for their degree programmes. Responses predominantly reflected a reliance on undergraduate students’ knowledge as revealed to lecturers in seminar discussions, performance in assessments and the like; some comments reflected assumptions about the direct confluence and logical connection between a particular A level and a particular degree; a few other comments conveyed familiarity with the A level courses; and a few reported work with schools and FE colleges as main sources of information. Typical remarks for each of these four response types, respectively, were:

- ‘Close reading skills, knowledge of contexts, range of reading’

- ‘Well if they want to do a degree in English Language and Linguistics, it's useful if they have an idea of what this is all about’
- ‘content of qualification’
- ‘working with sixth-form colleagues’

Related to the second comment, though others noted differences between the content of the Language A level and degree programmes in English Language and particularly Linguistics (one respondent pointing out that students were ‘often confused’ by this difference), one comment stressed the value of a relevant A level in terms of the student experience and (implicitly) retention, stating “students who have taken the English Language or combined Lang/Lit A-level know what they're getting into (to some extent) and there is less chance of them having chosen the wrong degree”.

This respondent and others, along with the 2017/2018 Russell Group guide, describe the Lang-Lit A level as a ‘combined’ course. However, rather than offering some units in language study and some units in literary study, there is a move towards integration in some of the post-2015 Lang-Lit specifications. For example, students might analyse linguistic aspects of characterisation, or compare narrative features of fictional and non-fictional texts. Literary and linguistic study are threaded together more consistently throughout the A level. This A level is perhaps the most changed for the greatest number of specifications. On the basis of these changes, and the commensurate changes in the knowledge and learning experiences of students taking this A level, the few HEI providers of English courses who have historically excluded this A level from their suite of alternative prerequisites might want to review the new version of the A level and consider including it.

Notably, some of the comments framed their responses to the question of what informs their perceptions of the usefulness of the A levels negatively: where the answer to the question was implicitly that students’ abilities or knowledge informed their perceptions of the A levels, the emphasis within the answer was sometimes on a perceived deficit, specifically, in students’ abilities or knowledge. Typical comments of this kind were ‘lack of depth of reading, engagement with texts/reading, and critical evaluation skills’, ‘there are often pretty significant gaps in terms of their writing skills, ability to critically evaluate a text, depth of reading and preparedness to study English at university level’, and ‘the biggest difficulties are with logical priority, argumentative structure, and argumentative consistency’. Comments communicating a perceived deficit which referred to the A level in English Literature tended to focus on perceived weaknesses in skills in written expression, argumentative logic, critical thinking, etc., while comments with some negative framing which referred to the A level in English Language tended to refer to differences between topics covered at post-16 education and HE, especially when the latter was a Linguistics course. Examples of the latter include ‘the English Language elements at A level focus on description, using categories that are naive at best’, ‘the kind of material covered in English Language A-level is very different from the kind of linguistics we do at university, so is less useful’, and ‘students’ understanding of key issues (e.g., language acquisition) seem to be informed by very dated argument and theory (e.g., behaviourism), and most do not seem to have much idea about current developments in the various subareas of

linguistics'. Though the correlation is not as systematic, there is a perceptible tendency in the former set - the comments referring to the Literature A level - to attribute the deficit to the students, i.e. the weaknesses are gaps in 'their skills', whereas in the latter set - the comments referring the Language A level - weaknesses were attributed to the A level itself as often as they were attributed to the students. Overall there were more positively framed responses explicitly referring to the Language A level than there were positive responses explicitly referring to the other two A levels (e.g. 'stronger first year students tend to have done an A level in English language' and 'the English Language A-level is reasonable at preparing students for the degree programme').

Comments about the Lang-Lit A level were far fewer – indeed this A level was notable by its relative absence from the consideration of respondents, even when discussing degree courses which involved study of both literature and language (e.g. 'While our degree is English Literature and Language, and so background in EngLang is certainly a bonus, the majority of our undergraduates have only studied EngLit at A Level (or equivalent)'). Several responses also referred to, for example, 'an "A level" in English Language *or* Literature' (emphasis added), ignoring or excluding the Lang-Lit A level.

Some comments explicitly noted the different kinds of preparedness all three A levels might offer for particular courses, e.g. "Our programme doesn't include linguistics or English Language components -- therefore, the most useful preparation is the A level in English Literature. That said, students on the English Language and Literature and English Language A levels do engage with important issues in relation to literature, the most significant of which are clear and cogent communication and critical thinking."

Interestingly, and perhaps counter-intuitively, the courses for which the Literature A level was stipulated as the only prerequisite had titles as varied as 'English', 'English Language and Literature', 'English Literature and Creative Writing', 'English Studies', 'English and Creative Writing', 'Comparative Literature and English Language', and 'English'. While course titles are not transparent indicators of content or of the proportion of attention given to different areas of English study, some of these courses include at least some language study, which is absent from the Literature A level, and some courses also include creative writing (variably included across most of the A levels and their specifications). For these courses, it is possible that the prerequisite was not necessarily chosen chiefly on the basis of an assumed direct confluence and logical connection between A level content and undergraduate course content. Meanwhile, degrees in English Language and/or Linguistics now seem more likely to include English Language within their prerequisites and/or alternative prerequisites than they did in Goddard and Beard's study of 2007, which perhaps reflects an increasing recognition of the relevance, quality and relative 'challenge' of this A level.

### **HEI understanding of the content and teaching methods involved in A levels in English**

Given that a significant source of information informing HEI respondents' perceptions of the A levels is undergraduate students' background knowledge as revealed in class discussions, it is likely that these perceptions will begin to catch up with the realities of the new A levels as time

passes and more classroom discussions with the Autumn 2017 intake have happened. However, such revelations will inevitably be piecemeal, and some lecturers may not encounter these students until they are in their second or third year of study. HEI lecturers' awareness could be more proactively developed by sharing these piecemeal revelations among them, by engaging with Cushing, Giovanelli and Snapper's summary document (2015), and by communicating directly with schools and colleges.

Subject content and assessment methods are two areas of change at A level. Naturally, teaching methods also evolve in relation to these two areas, and may also evolve routinely as teachers review their practice irrespective of curriculum reform. 'Teaching methods' can be interpreted broadly and abstractly, e.g. simply to refer to lectures, seminars and tutorials, or can be considered at a more fine-grained level, e.g. use of pre-reading prompt/guidance questions, use of online interactive learning tools, flipped classroom methods, the relative prioritisation of free intellectual exploration vs. targeting explicit assessment objectives, etc. Green reports first year undergraduate students' perceptions of differences in the nature of study between post-16 and HE English courses, including differences in the 'details and nature of analysis', differences in the 'type of reading' required, and differences in the 'range of perspectives' involved, along with differences in 'the level of research' and 'the level of independence' (2005, 24). Given such perceived differences in kinds of study, differences between teaching methods in HE and post-16 education might also be logically anticipated.

As reported in Green (2005) and Goddard and Beard (2007), Assessment Objectives have come to play a much more significant part in all post-16 classroom activities since 2000. Green (2005, 34) describes the "astonishing foregrounding" of assessment objectives, and draws out from teachers' responses to a survey question that the 'focus on Assessment Objectives leads to teaching certain aspects of a text rather than the text as a whole; [...] there has been a narrowing of focus in teaching away from the general and on to what will be examined; [...] [and] tasks are "compartmentalised" by the Assessment Objectives'. Direct quotes from teachers' responses include comments that the Assessment Objectives 'hedge in the teaching of text', 'inhibit more daring approaches' and 'create a sense of the texts as a system/machine'. Hodgson (2010, 16, 65) likewise highlights post-16 teaching methods which are assessment objective-led'. This suggests that Assessment Objectives have at the times of these reports been seen as a straight-jacket, and from our own anecdotal experience some teachers report this as still being the case.

HEI course directors' knowledge of A level teaching methods was hard to capture through the survey, and we did not expect many respondents to have access to this kind of information, but some responses to two of the survey questions partially broached this issue. In response to the question asking what kinds of changes in subject content and assessment methods HEI course directors were aware of at A level, some noted the change from modular to linear assessment, while remarks included 'the current A-level curriculum seems limited and the methods employed deeply reductive' and 'A levels train [students] to memorize a body of knowledge rather than to develop a set of transferable skills'. In answer to the question asking what kinds of changes were being made to HEI programmes in response to the changes at A level, most responses reported an increase in provision of support to help students develop



academic skills. Some respondents also reported an increase in the amount of contextual and cultural background they were providing around texts, and a more limited scope of study, e.g. 'less reading is expected'. Some also referred to changes in assessments, often diversifying assessment types and/or giving more support to students in their production of written coursework. There were no explicit descriptions of changes to teaching methods (beyond those implicitly entailed in changes in provisions of academic skills training and altered assessments), though one referred to 'more focus on being an independent and active learner', which entails adapted teaching methods.

The descriptions of major and minor changes to HEI programmes suggest that some positive changes are occurring in generic areas such as research skills and independent learning. The issues of whether or not HEI course providers can or should change content and/or teaching and assessment methods in more subject-specific ways specifically in relation to changes at A level is more complex. For those degree courses which do not require any A or AS level in English, such changes are less relevant, though it could perhaps be predicted that at least some of the students taking those courses will have taken one or more of those A or AS levels (presuming they were available at their post-16 providers), given those students' interest in English (as evidenced by the HEI course choice). For those degree programmes for which one or more of the A levels in English is a prerequisite, attempting to build a coherent bridge between study at post-16 education and at HE seems logical. And yet, the data suggest that this often does not happen in subject-specific ways. Similar patterns are discernible in Green (2005, 44) where 94% of surveyed English lecturers reported no change or not much change in their teaching methods since the introduction of Curriculum 2000. Also, our survey reveals that 61% of respondents believed that their teaching staff were either not informed at all, or only a little informed, about the A level reforms. Given the implicit relative lack of familiarity among HEI providers with the *content* of the current A levels (complicated by the diversity of A levels and specifications within those A levels), familiarity with teaching methods at A level may be even less likely.

The attention to study skills is worthwhile, and is perhaps the area in greatest need of support, or where the most effective changes can be most easily made. However, more subject-specific pedagogic issues, such as how and how far interpretative strategies are taught at A level, what guidance students are given in reading and digesting texts, and what a sample of classroom activities might look like, are all worth lecturers' attention. A programme of lecturers' observation of a sample of local post-16 teaching would be one method of achieving such insights, as modelled in Ballinger (2002) (and both the teachers and lecturers responding to Green's survey expressed a desire for an increase in this kind of contact [2005, 37, 46]).

### **Why is it important for HE lecturers to know about the A levels in English?**

Post-16 and HE study involve different student and institutional priorities and purposes (cf. Goddard and Beard 2007, 33-34). It is therefore inevitable and appropriate that there are differences between these levels of study. However, differences between the two levels does not need to entail substantial gaps between the two. Historically, research on transition has raised concern about evidence of gaps between post-16 and HE English education (e.g. Gawthrop and Martin 2003; Knights 2004). The Russell Group guide for students making choices about A

levels explicitly affirms the existence of a logical continuation; a bridge rather than a gap. The need for this bridge was also a key driver behind the recent reform (Giovanelli, Clark and Macrae, under review). The Russell Group guide states that ‘many courses at university level build on knowledge and skills which you will gain while still at school’ and uses this partly to explain the role and importance of the ‘facilitating subjects’ (2017/18a, 27). For such building and bridging to be possible, however, HE lecturers need to be aware of where students may be starting from.

One potential reason for HE lecturers to be aware of A level content might be to avoid repetition/duplication. However, in a survey of 71 second year undergraduate students of language and linguistics on feelings about repetition of A level content during the first year undergraduate teaching, 67 of those students ‘welcomed repetition’. Points which emerged from student responses were that repetition was felt to be ‘not so much repetition as reinforcement’, ‘comforting’, and as taking concepts further, going into more detail and acting ‘as a springboard’ for degree level work (Goddard and Beard 2007, 42). One student stated that it ‘helped me to recap some information that wasn’t fresh in my mind’ (43). There is clearly constructive value, then, in repetition, and it need not be avoided. However, understandably, it seems repetition is perceived to be most constructive when it is a starting point for more detailed and advanced study of that topic. In order to manage this process, and for repetition to be purposeful and appropriately built upon, lecturers need to be aware, as far as possible, of what kinds of prior subject-specific study experience their students are likely to have had.

Furthermore, Goddard and Beard found that an increased awareness of A level content gave HE lecturers ‘a better context for understanding the strengths and weaknesses their beginning undergraduates arrive with’. They also found a correlation between HE lecturers’ greater awareness of students’ background and lecturers’ greater positivity in their views of the qualities of the incoming students (2007, 47). That is, a greater awareness of A level content reduced the ‘deficit model’ model thinking about students’ prior learning. Interestingly, in his summary of over 600 scholarly works on transition issues, Harvey (2006, 4) notes that HEIs tend to focus ‘on the deficiencies of first-year students and how to provide for them’, leading lecturers to ‘overlook’ students’ strengths due to ‘anxiety about their weaknesses’ (Goddard and Beard 2007, 52). If greater HEI awareness of A level content could support a shift away from a deficit model of first year knowledge and learning (a model of fixing weaknesses) to a bridging model instead (of recognising and building on knowledge and competencies), both the student and the lecturer experience of transition could be improved. Lecturers would also be able to anticipate students’ expectations about subject content and learning and teaching methods and to support them in engaging with new challenges accordingly. As Goddard and Beard point out, understanding students’ prior course content and teaching methods allows those students who expect similar or closely related experiences at undergraduate level ‘to be seen as rationally following what they have been taught’ (2007, 52).

Green (2005, 45) proposes that management of the transition into Higher Education has implications for ‘retention’, is important in ‘assisting students to continue in their academic development’ and enabling ‘student progression’, and helps avoid ‘student difficulties and

possibly alienation'. More recent discussion considers transition a crucial factor within broader understandings of the student experience (cf. Ferriera 2018). The current significance of the National Student Satisfaction survey and Teaching Excellence Framework also provide new motivations for the kinds of 'cross-phase dialogue' and 'convergence of practice' called for by Green (2005, 3) to support the student transition into (and through) HE.

## Conclusion

The survey data reported in this article provide a snapshot of the current landscape of prerequisite and alternative prerequisite A levels in English for undergraduate degree programmes, and reveal HEI providers' views on the usefulness of those A levels as preparatory courses. This snapshot suggests a need for greater HEI awareness of the content and teaching methods involved in the post-2015 A levels to ensure that the prerequisites and alternative prerequisites are chosen based on up-to-date information, and to support a more positive, bridging transition experience between HE and post-16 study.

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