What are the impacts of qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds on higher education? A survey of 633 university lecturers

Conducted as part of the HE Engagement Research Programme

Executive Summary

Irenka Suto

April 2012

ARD Research Division
Cambridge Assessment
1 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB1 2EU
E-mail: suto.i@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

Executive Summary

This survey of 633 university lecturers of biology, English, mathematics, and a range of other subjects, indicates a healthy appetite for engagement in research exploring the transition from A level to higher education.

40% of the lecturers who took part in the survey were teaching at Russell Group universities and 60% were teaching at universities in other groupings. Throughout, the views and experiences of Russell Group lecturers were found to be broadly similar to those of other lecturers.

It was found that:

- Over 50% of lecturers think that new undergraduates are underprepared for degree level study.
- ICT, teamwork, intellectual curiosity, and presentation skills are those most likely to be considered strengths of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study.
- Most lecturers think that academic writing, self-directed study, independent inquiry and research, and critical thinking skills are weaknesses of typical undergraduates when they begin degree level study. Depth of subject knowledge is also a concern for most lecturers.
- Most lecturers think that self-directed study and note-taking pose transitional challenges for new undergraduates.
- Biology, chemistry and mathematics are the A level subjects considered by biology lecturers to provide the best preparation for a biology degree.
- History, English, and English literature are the A level subjects considered by lecturers of English to provide the best preparation for an English degree.
- Mathematics, further mathematics, and physics are the A level subjects considered by mathematics lecturers to provide the best preparation for a mathematics degree.
- More generally, history, English and mathematics are the A level subjects considered to provide the best preparation for degree level study by lecturers across a wide range of subjects.
- According to 60% of lecturers, their institutions provide additional support classes for underprepared 1st year undergraduates. Classes often focus on writing and independent learning skills.
- 72% of lecturers have had to adapt their teaching approaches to teach underprepared 1st year undergraduates. This most frequently entails covering more basic, fundamental or lower level content. Teaching higher level study skills, essay writing, and academic writing are common adaptations among English lecturers. Biology lecturers teach more numeracy and mathematical skills.
- 87% of lecturers think that too much ‘teaching to the test’ is a major factor contributing to undergraduates being underprepared.
- Many changes to A level suggested by lecturers relate to pedagogy and student learning, and include allowing less spoon-feeding and teaching to the test. Other suggestions include making examination questions less predictable and reducing re-sit opportunities.