INCREASING DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LONGER TERM: THE ROLE OF 14+ QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM REFORM

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> *Supply mechanisms alone cannot affect the two major factors that currently limit the expansion of HE: an inadequate supply of younger applicants qualified to Level 3, and unclear signals from employers about demand for graduates with qualifications other than first degrees* (HEFCE, 2001:32)

SECTION 1: EXPANDING HIGHER EDUCATION: IS THE 50 PER CENT TARGET REALISABLE?

The Government has a target of 50 per cent of young people participating in higher education before the age of 30 by the end of the decade. Its policy in this area has primarily focused on four strands - increasing the overall supply of higher education places; providing financial incentives for higher education institutions to widen participation to non-traditional learners; introducing a diverse range of initiatives to encourage non-traditional learners to apply for higher education and to support them through their courses; and bringing in a new two-year Foundation Degree. At first glance, this appears to be a rational policy approach rooted in a sense of social and educational justice.

As in other areas of post-compulsory education, however, the Government is committing itself primarily to a 'supply-side' strategy - focusing broadly on the supply of provision to stimulate learner demand. We would contend that historical analysis of participation trends in higher education suggests that sustainable expansion takes place when effective demand for learning has been generated (Hodgson and Spours, 2000). The largest rise in higher educational participation, which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was under-pinned by equally large rises in post-16 participation and achievement and by changes in occupational structure leading to increased demand for undergraduate degrees (HEFCE, 2001).

In the recent period, however, many universities, particularly the post-1992 institutions, have experienced a short-fall of demand for places, which suggests that the prospects of success for

supply-side approaches alone should be questioned. Moreover, many of the new universities experience high 'drop out' rates largely due to the fact that they tend to recruit students with relatively low previous levels of attainment and from more diverse social groups. In addition, these students are often living at home, may be more involved in the local labour market and face a range of external pressures but without clear signals from employers that they value higher education qualifications (HEFCE, 2001).

As we have suggested in earlier work (Hodgson and Spours, 2000), there has been a slowing down in the rate of participation in higher education since the mid-1990s that makes the level of expansion the Government is aiming for less secure than it might wish. Our contention is that current Government policies to widen and increase participation in higher education rely too heavily on the idea that there is a latent unmet demand for higher education. The underlying assumptions behind all of these policies are that there is a pool of sufficiently qualified under 30s who can be encouraged to see higher education as a relevant and attractive option and that education policies on their own can bring about changes in the behaviour of young people.

In this chapter, we suggest that both these assumptions are questionable and that more radical long-term policies involving both the education system and the labour market may be necessary if the Government is to create sustainable demand for higher education by both students and by employers. To this end, we pose a number of key questions:

- where are the students going to come from if the 50 per cent target is to be met?

- should the expansion of higher education participation be based on increased demand for learning of the younger age group (e.g. 14-19 year olds) or can increased demand for learning be largely confined to 20-30 year olds?

- in either or both cases, what reforms are required to the education and training system to ensure effective demand for learning and, therefore, a strong supply of students capable of sustained participation in higher education?

- finally, what changes are required in the labour market and higher education itself if the 50 per cent target is to be realised?

We begin to address these questions by examining briefly recent trends in post-16 participation; how learners currently progress through earlier stages of the education and training system and what appear to be the drivers and inhibitors to participation in higher education. We confine our discussion to the under 30s partly because of the focus of the current Government target in this area and partly because other chapters in this volume examine trends for more mature learners. In this section of the chapter, we also look at the important effects of labour market trends and the role of employers in higher education participation. In the second part of the chapter we focus on the recent reform of advanced level qualifications for 16-19 years olds, known as *Curriculum 2000* and speculate on the effects that these changes to the previous stage of education might have on higher education participation. We conclude by suggesting that, while current Government initiatives to widen participation in higher education are valuable, longer-term more radical reform of the education and training system from 14+, including more active involvement by employers, will be needed if we are to encourage more young people to enter and to succeed in higher education over the next few years. Finally, we suggest that the nature of higher education itself will need to change if it is to prove attractive to and worthwhile for the new cohort of students that the 50 per cent target envisages.

SECTION 2: TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION AND ACHIEVEMENT 14-19

'System slowdown'

While it is difficult to get to the bottom of where the target for participation in higher education originated and what rationale lay behind the figure of 50 per cent, there are nevertheless strong arguments for wanting the majority of under 30s involved in some form of higher education. Research suggests that significant economic and wider social benefits are derived from this activity (Bynner and Egerton 1999; Brennan *et al.* 2000).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, expansion of higher education took place without explicit targets but as a result of rapid rises in both full-time participation and examination attainment of 16-19 year olds. Similarly, as participation and achievement rates for 16-19 year olds began to level out in the mid-1990s, so too did the expansion of participation in higher education for this age group. It is clear, therefore, that reaching the Government's target for higher education expansion will rely, both on stimulating participation and achievement in the

previous phase of education (i.e. amongst 14-19 year olds) and on increasing demand among those in their early 20s in the workplace to undertake a form of part-time higher education.

By considering both of these approaches, it is more likely that not only will we reach the Government's target, but that participation in higher education will be more appropriate and there will be some change in the social composition of participants. Moreover, by considering the role of both 14-19 and 20-30 year olds, the higher education target can be based on considerations of what should be achieved at Level 3 (the area where the UK is recognised to be most deficient when compared internationally), rather than being seen as somewhat disconnected from wider education and training policies and debates.

Taking what we will term a 'system-based' long-term approach rather than an 'initiatives-based' short-term approach to higher education expansion among the under 30s (which is the main Government approach in this area currently), requires a historical analysis of participation and achievement trends among 14-19 year olds and their influence on the expansion of higher education. In our view, the outcome of such an analysis suggests that we are currently trapped in what we call 'system slowdown' and that only through tackling some of the significant barriers to participation and achievement for 14-19 year olds and ensuring continued employer demand for graduates will we be able to bring about the necessary 'system acceleration' that the HE target demands.

Trends in participation and achievement

Participation trends in full-time education and the work-based route 16-19

Statistics on participation and attainment among 16-19 year olds suggest that the post-compulsory education and training system in the UK has, for approaching a decade, moved into a distinctive new phase which we term 'system slowdown'. This describes a situation in which there is little or no growth in many of the major participation and attainment indicators for 14-19 year olds.

This period of system slowdown started in 1994 with the peaking of participation rates in full-time education at 16, following several years of strong growth (Hodgson & Spours 2000). Currently, 71 per cent of young people stay on at school or college after 16 and 58 per cent at 17 (DfES 2001a). These full-time participation levels have remained static during the last

five years. Furthermore, the same flattening trend has spread to the work-based route. Between 1997-2000, participation in Advanced Modern Apprenticeship (AMAs) plateaued, following rapid growth in the early-mid 1990s, and overall participation in other types of work-based training has actually declined (DfES 2001b).

Attainment trends in general education 14-19

Attainment trends in GCSEs and A Levels have broadly followed the same pattern – rapid rises in the late-1980s and early-1990s and then a slowing trend over the last five years or so. Currently, 50 per cent of 16 year olds achieve five or more A*-C grades at GCSE and improvement in attainment at this level has been increasing by only one percentage point per year in the late 1990s, about half the rate of growth a decade ago. Attainment rates in A Levels and Advanced GNVQs have grown at an even slower rate and by 2000 were virtually static with just under 35 per cent of 17 year olds gaining two or more A Levels or equivalent (DfES 2001c). Moreover, qualifications outcomes from all types of training, including AMAs, have also plateaued over the last three years (DfES 2001b).

These trends will inhibit higher education expansion since statistical evidence suggests that attainment at A Level is vital for increasing the demand for higher education places among young people in all social groups. As stated in a recent IPPR report,

> *"once a working student has defied the odds and obtained two A Levels, she is highly likely to take up a university place*. (Piatt and Robinson 2001: 12)

The factors affecting these trends are, arguably, structural. They are related to barriers in the qualifications system which deter many young people from studying and achieving beyond 16. In particular, there are issues related to the achievement of five A*-C grades at GCSE (the threshold for entry to advanced level study) and poor progression rates between post-16 Level 2 and Level 3 courses. In addition, the gap between GCSE and A Level has been difficult to bridge for many learners.

The problems of attainment in the work-based route are somewhat different. These relate mainly to the lack of incentives for young people to achieve qualifications in apprenticeships which will have to be addressed in further reform of the Modern Apprenticeship System (Keep 2002). In cases of both full-time education and the work-based route, there is a need,

therefore, for further reform of the 14+ qualifications system and of labour markets if demand for higher education is to be stimulated.

Patterns of higher education participation – the historical influence of system factors

The major expansion of undergraduate higher education from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s was based largely on the full-time participation of 18-21 year olds (HEFCE 2001), although the numbers of mature students also increased during this period. This trend brought about some changes in the composition of higher education students. There was a dramatic increase in the number of females involved in higher education - by 1996 they constituted 51 per cent of participants compared to 26 per cent in 1962. Moreover, many ethnic minority groups became more than proportionately represented in higher education, although the majority of these students are concentrated in the post-1992 universities (NCIHE 1997). However, there has been a much slower change in the social composition of higher education. Despite the doubling of the proportion of entrants from semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups, the general social composition of undergraduate higher education remains largely unchanged (NCIHE 1997, NAO 2002). This may be related to the fact that there has been much less change in the balance between full-time and part-time students during the expansion period (HESA 2000) and because there is a strong correlation between social class and educational attainment among younger learners (HEFCE 2001).

At the same time, according to demographic trends produced for the Government Actuary, while there will be a steady increase in the number of 18-21 year olds over the next ten years, the social composition of this group is likely to change in favour of those who have traditionally participated least in higher education (HEFCE 2001).

The HEFCE report recognises this problem:

> *"the largest potential for growth comes from young people from poor backgrounds. If their school staying-on rates and examination achievements at Level 3 increase to the national average, this alone will require 100,000 further places in HE" (HEFCE 2001: 22):*

Both these arguments about the social composition of higher education and the potential for change are related to the need for two deep structural reforms. First, it is necessary to

increase significantly the attainment of these social groups in the compulsory and post-compulsory education system (i.e. among 14-19 year olds); second, there is a need for changes in the mode of higher education participation with a greater emphasis on part-time study. Again, this takes us back to our arguments about the need for reform of the qualifications system from 14+ and changes in the labour market and its relationship to higher education.

SECTION 3. REFORMING THE 14+ QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM SYSTEM AND CHANGES TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Since its election in 1997, the Labour Government has attempted to reform qualifications in some areas. What we will demonstrate below is that this has been a piecemeal approach that has not sufficiently addressed the underlying education and training system issues discussed above. Similarly, it has attempted to reform Modern Apprenticeships and to encourage employers to become more involved with the education and training system (e.g. new Sector Skills Councils, The National Skills Taskforce and the Learning and Skills Council system). However, none of these initiatives as yet constitutes the basis for the kind of labour market reform we see as essential to support the higher education participation target. We examine both of these issues below.

Reforming advanced level qualifications - *Curriculum 2000* as an island of reform

In September 2000, students on advanced level programmes began to take up the new qualifications resulting from the *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE,1997) reform process. Responding to long-standing pressures for changes to what were regarded as narrow, wasteful and divisive advanced level qualifications, the Government introduced AS/A2 levels to replace the old A Level; Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs) to replace Advanced GNVQs; a new Key Skills Qualification in Communication, Application of Number and IT and proposals for Advanced Extension Awards with the eventual promise of some form of overarching certificate.

The reforms aimed to broaden advanced level programmes of study; to provide a 'stepping stone' from GCSE to A Level; to introduce vocational qualifications which are of the same

size as AS/A2s and with external assessment to encourage external recognition and parity of esteem for academic and vocational qualifications. The Key Skill Qualification was meant to provide a more applied and employment-related focus for all 16-19 year olds. A further key aim was to support greater participation, attainment and progression in advanced level study. *Curriculum 2000* was therefore, by definition, seen as a way of stimulating greater demand for higher education.

While demands for a baccalaureate-style award were at this point rejected, there was a Government expectation that Year 12 students should take up to five subjects in the first year of study; that there should be more mixing of academic and vocational qualifications and that all students should be engaged with key skills.

However, while all advanced level students (bar a few in more traditional vocational programmes) had to take the new qualifications, it was up to schools, colleges and students to decide how many and what combination of subjects they would study. Moreover, it was left to universities to decide what qualifications they would recognise and require. The *Curriculum 2000* reform package was, therefore, largely voluntarist and it was left in the main to the market to determine the outcome of the changes.

The first year of *Curriculum 2000* was far from smooth and led to a review of the reforms by Professor David Hargreaves, Chief Executive at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (Hargreaves, 2001a; Hargreaves, 2001b). What research on the first year of the reforms indicated is that a slim majority of advanced level students did take four or more subjects; that there was a significant increase in taught hours; that students welcomed the flexibility and choice provided by the new and smaller qualification blocks (Savory *et al*, 2001a; Spours *et al,* 2002). So, on the positive side, advanced level students are more focused, are doing more and are working harder. This may provide benefits for participation in higher education in terms of attitude to study and achievement at Level 3. It is also possible that more students may be attracted into advanced level study as a result of the more accessible AS Level and good results in the AS in the first round of examinations.

These positive developments, however, have been offset by a number of more negative factors related to *Curriculum 2000*. The rushed, over-assessed and overloaded nature of the AS qualification has encouraged a didactic approach to teaching and has afforded little time for students to develop the research and study skills required for further and higher learning

(Savory *et al* 2001b; Savory *et al,* 2002; Spours *et al,* 2002). Moreover, full time-tables have given students less time for independent study and for extra-curricular activities, both of which have traditionally been seen as a good preparation for higher education. In addition, recent research suggests that students are continuing and even increasing their engagement with part-time work (Payne, 2001; Fowler *et al,* 2002).

While students on AS programmes have experienced the benefits of the easier climb from intermediate to advanced level study offered by the AS (in most subjects) and have had reasonable examination success at the end of the first year of the reforms, students taking AVCEs have had a rather different and potentially off-putting experience. This is as a result of the requirement for Level 3 achievement from the beginning of the course and the consequent low pass rate in these awards. Key skills has proved to be a particularly problematic aspect of the reforms being both unpopular with students and teachers and being largely rejected by higher education providers (Hodgson *et al,* 2001).

Early evidence about the performance of *Curriculum 2000* in stimulating demand for higher education is, therefore, very mixed. On the one hand, there will be a rise in the number of students achieving the equivalent of three A Levels as a result of increases in the size of programmes of study at advanced level (Spours *et al.* 2002); a trend also suggested in provisional attainment statistics for 2000/1 (DfES 2001c). On the other hand, the new programmes of study have been hard work, even laborious, and there is some evidence that this may have deterred some students from considering higher education (Spours *et al.* 2002).

Perhaps most importantly, *Curriculum 2000* has been affected by the confused position of end-users, a position not helped by confusions in the reforms themselves. Comprising many different qualifications blocks and initiatives implemented in a rush, *Curriculum 2000* suffers from not having a clear identity, unlike either the old A Level or baccalaureate awards in other countries. Currently, our local research suggests that employers are unaware of *Curriculum 2000* (Fowler *et al.* 2002) and it is unclear what incentive they have to understand it better. Universities too are confused and their unclear and diverse responses to the reforms have not helped schools and colleges to encourage students to significantly broaden their programmes of study or to experiment with new combinations of subjects or key skills (Savory *et al*, 2001b, Spours *et al.* 2002).

We would suggest that the problem related to *Curriculum 2000* and end-users has just as much to do with the reforms themselves as with the 'cautious' response of higher education providers. The elective nature of *Curriculum 2000* has left universities uncertain about what schools and colleges were going to offer and what students would achieve and many were anxious not to demand

qualifications that might not be taken by their 'traditional market'. In this respect, higher education's position can be seen less as direct opposition to *Curriculum 2000* than as a rational response to a voluntarist reform in a market-led system in which universities wished to secure a predictable flow of high quality applicants.

Taken overall, the emphasis in the reform on breadth and standards rather than on progression, and the fact that *Curriculum 2000* emerged as an 'island of reform' unconnected with changes to GCSE or the curriculum in higher education, mean that there is no holistic strategy for progression into higher education for the 14-19 age group. The result is likely to be that *Curriculum 2000*, in its current form, may well have only a 'neutral' effect on the expansion of higher education.

A new and coherent approach to 14+ education and training to strengthen longer-term demand for higher education

It is clear from the earlier analysis in this chapter that participation rates in higher education rose mainly as a result of increasing participation and attainment amongst 16-19 year olds. While we have demonstrated that there is currently a broadly plateauing trend in this area, we do not believe that the level of participation in higher education among 18-21 year olds (currently around a third) has reached saturation point and the UK still lags behind many other countries in this respect (HEFCE, 2001). But we argue that further increases will only be the result of more deep-seated and connective reform related to the whole 14-19 age group as well as reform to the labour market. This latter point we address at the end of the chapter.

The Government's current focus on 14-19 education and training provides an opportunity to take a more strategic approach to this important education phase and to create long-term effective demand for further learning in the younger age group which goes beyond the current initiative-led approach in this area.

We would suggest that the first issue to tackle will have to be an overhaul of GCSE so that more learners are encouraged to continue to study up to the age of 19, rather than experiencing a sense of failure at 16 and opting out much earlier, as is currently the case. As we have seen earlier, only if there is a significant growth in the number of younger students from all social classes succeeding at Intermediate and then at Advanced Level, will there be sufficient throughput to increase the numbers eligible for entry to higher education. We envisage this throughput being achieved through the development of a multi-level English

Baccalaureate system from 14+ which allows learners to progress at different rates at different ages, but with the majority of the cohort achieving a single and recognisable advanced level award at 18 or 19 in both general and vocational education. We see such a system as the only way of increasing Level 3 achievement among younger learners while, at the same time, providing them with the skills, knowledge and motivation to succeed in higher education.

An English Baccalaureate system from 14+ would also provide the opportunity to raise the profile of vocational education, not by creating yet another separate routeway for certain students (traditionally the lower achievers), but by bringing technical/vocational study into a single mainstream 14+ system. This would require the creation of a high-profile vocational baccalaureate variant which would contain the strong general education component common to all baccalaureates, together with an equally strong and specialised technical/vocational strand recognised by the best employers. This development does not imply full-time education for the whole cohort. A vocational baccalaureate could be designed for the apprenticeship system. Moreover, the linking of the award of apprenticeship to the achievement of such a vocational award could significantly improve qualification rates in the work-based route and allow greater opportunities for progression to part-time higher education.

The development of an English Baccalaureate as a recognisable single product achieved by the majority of 18/19 year olds could provide a transparent and confident signal to both higher education providers and employers of the capabilities and achievements of successful learners. In order to ensure this recognition, however, it is imperative that employers and higher education providers, as well as teachers and policy-makers, are involved in the design of the baccalaureate system so that they not only trust what it produces but they can see how they might build upon its outcomes.

The limits of qualifications reform – engaging with the labour market

While we think that a 14+ English Baccalaureate system could contribute significantly to creating an increased and sustainable demand for higher education from younger learners, this reform in itself will not address all of the factors that currently suppress demand among this age group. In our earlier analysis, we indicated that changes to the labour market and the demand for qualifications by employers also have a fundamental shaping role in young

people's desire to undertake higher education. In this respect, we see the need to consider three major connected developments in relation to the labour market and the role of employers.

First, as we have already argued above, it is important for employers to become more fully involved in the process of qualification at advanced level through the provision of high quality apprenticeships leading to a vocational baccalaureate; by involvement in the design of such a system; by their willingness to work in partnership with colleges and to demand higher level qualifications as entry to or promotion within certain types of occupations (that is to say by adopting a 'licence to practice' approach to training and qualification). A limited number of sectors already operate in this way, but it is important for this development to become more widespread, particularly in growth areas such as service sector.

Second, there is a need to engage employers around the issue of 'learning and earning' among full-time 16-19 year olds. Presently, local studies suggest that between 70 and 80 per cent of 17 to 18 year olds are involved in part-time work during term time (Hodgson and Spours, 2001; Fowler *et al,* 2002). Furthermore, a large national study also suggests that those in Year 13 working more than 10 hours or in Year 12 working more than 15 hours are likely to jeopardise their achievement at A Level by up to two grades (Payne, 2001).

Our local research on this issue undertaken in South Gloucestershire suggests that part-time work might have a contradictory effect on progression into higher education. On the one hand, it may provide funds for future participation, but it is more likely to diminish students' appetite or capacity to progress to a selective university because of the way part-time employment compromises the aspirations and achievement of some learners. These we refer to as 'risk-takers' (Hodgson and Spours, 2001). What is needed is more active employer understanding of this issue and dialogue with education providers about the demands of advanced level study, so that all full-time students reap the benefits of part-time work without undermining their achievement and aspirations for further progression (Fowler *et al,* 2002). This new research suggests that some kind of compact between students, employers and education providers could create the basis for a more productive relationship between learning and earning.

Third, is the need to stimulate increased participation in higher education by the 20-30 year olds who are currently in work. This will require connecting study and achievement at Level 4

more closely with promotion, advancement and meeting new and rigorous occupational standards. Currently, participation in HND-style provision is decreasing but it is hoped that the new Foundation Degrees will reverse this trend (HEFCE, 2001). It is interesting to note that a major area of expansion in part-time under-graduate study has been in the allied medical field (HESA, 2000) where there has been significant change in the occupational structure and levels of responsibility leading to increased demand for higher education courses and qualifications. While this area of engagement is beyond the 14-19 focus of this chapter, it underlines the importance of the relationship between changing labour markets demands and higher education participation.

Seeing current initiatives for HE participation as part of a longer-term strategy

The development of a coherent 14+ English Baccalaureate system, allied to labour market changes, is clearly a long-term strategy for increasing the demand for higher education in both general and vocational learning. As *Curriculum 2000* has demonstrated, it is vital to take a long term and carefully managed approach to qualifications reform because of its systemic nature. The kind of reforms we envisage will not necessarily produce the flow of students to meet the Government's higher education target by 2010, though they may do so five to ten years later.

The current initiatives approach to raising levels of participation in higher education (eg Excellence Challenge, financial support for students, increased information about the costs and benefits of higher education) would have far more chance of success as complementary strategies to the development of an English Baccalaureate system from 14+. There are limits to initiative-led reform in this area, because it tries to bring about changed behaviour without addressing the fundamental barriers to educational participation. In our view, while clearly valuable, current initiatives to stimulate higher education expansion are likely to enjoy only limited success.

Finally, qualification and curriculum reforms from 14+ allied to reform of the labour market and the expansion of the higher education system all point to the need for the development of a different type of higher education. Undergraduate education will not in the future be predominantly about single-subject full-time Honours Degrees. It is more likely to be part-time, more alternance-based, modular and with more labour-market connection and, as a

result, it is likely to involve students from wider social backgrounds because higher education will be more related to working life rather than being a deferral of it.

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