

Student choice of study in Curriculum 2000

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Summary

A new curriculum and assessment structure for students staying in education after age 16 was introduced in the UK for first teaching in 2000, which has become known as Curriculum 2000. Substantial effects of this new curriculum were noted for student retention in the education system and it has also impacted upon students' choices regarding completion of courses and choice of subjects. First examinations for Curriculum 2000 subjects were introduced in 2001 for the one year AS courses and in summer 2002 for the two year A level courses. A questionnaire study was conducted in September 2002 to investigate how students who had completed their AS examinations decided whether to continue studying a particular subject to A level. Media coverage of concerns regarding the standards of the summer 2002 A level examinations coincided with the questionnaire being completed by the students, making the responses regarding students' attitudes to the media coverage of examination results very interesting. This paper discusses the impact of Curriculum 2000 upon students' choices of study and students' accounts of their choices, as well as their attitudes to the examinations and the media.

Introduction

Since the introduction of A level examinations in 1951, they have remained the main university entrance examination in the UK (UCAS, 2002). Over the years, the content, range and style of the examinations has changed a great deal, but The Dearing Report (1996) proposed fairly radical changes to the structure of the examinations, that were brought in for first teaching in autumn 2000 and have become known as Curriculum 2000. With the new structure, students could take courses for one year and sit three modules for an AS examination and, if they chose to continue studying the subject in the second year, they could sit a further three A2 module examinations and, with the six modules aggregated, gain an A level qualification. Alongside the new A levels, Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) examinations were introduced, which were intended to have equal status with the A level, but had different assessment styles and were largely in different, applied subject areas, such as Health and Social Care. Primarily, the objectives of Curriculum 2000 were

- to increase the breadth of students' study between academic and vocational style assessments,
- to encourage students to study the key skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT¹ and
- to increase student participation rates after compulsory schooling, which ends at age 16.

With examinations available after a year, the new curriculum was designed to be more attractive to students who might be put off by the prospect of two year courses and students were encouraged to study four subjects in the first year, specialising to three in the second year. Hodgson and Spours (2003) characterise the reforms as involving voluntarism, meaning that there was no requirement upon students or educational establishments to implement the reforms in a manner that would meet the objectives.

¹ As key skills are not analysed further in this paper, readers interested in the uptake of key skills as part of Curriculum 2000 could consult the UCAS surveys (eg 62.5% students were working towards at least one key skill qualification in 2001: UCAS/QCA, 2001).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the reforms were implemented in a short timescale. In the first year of the AS examinations (2001), the Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced a review once it became apparent that students were struggling with the additional workload of four subjects and schools were not yet prepared to teach and administer the new curriculum (Hodgson and Spours, 2003). Minor changes to the examination timetable and some question papers were put into place before the next year. In the first year of the new A level examinations (2002), evidence showed that Curriculum 2000 had a major impact upon students' choice of study and their achievements. Almost a month following the publication of results, allegations regarding the poor marking of coursework in one awarding body surfaced in the media. Soon, the allegations had spread to include political interference in the grading of the examinations and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills instigated a Public Inquiry, headed by Mike Tomlinson. Issues surrounding public confidence in the examination system (Tierney and McMillan, 2003), the relationship between the UK examination system and the media (Murphy and Warmington workshop) and the politics of the examination crisis (McCaig, 2003) are the focus of other papers at this conference². The purpose of this paper is to investigate some of the intended and unintended implications of Curriculum 2000 for student choice of study.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicators for 2001 show the UK to have a poor full time education participation rate compared with other OECD countries at ages 17 and 18 (OECD, 2003). At age 17, only Ireland, Greece, New Zealand, Mexico and Turkey had lower participation rates than the UK, with 21 other countries exceeding the UK rate. By age 18, Canada, Korea and the United States joined the list of countries with lower participation rates, but 18 countries still exceeded the UK rate. Clearly, this is cause for concern in the UK, but there is some evidence that Curriculum 2000 has affected the proportion of young people staying in school to take examinations at ages 17 and 18. In 2001, 40% of 17 year olds sat AS examinations (Table 1). There is no equivalent examination in 2000 for a comparison of entries, but the AS entry for 2001 was a higher proportion of the targeted age than for A level in the same year. In 2001 the A levels were the old style curriculum. The number of 17 year olds sitting AS examinations rose to almost half of the cohort in 2002. Thus, it could be said that the introduction of Curriculum 2000 met one of its aims: to increase participation.

Table 1 Proportion of 17 year olds taking AS examinations and 18 year olds taking A level examinations in the UK

	2001	2002
AS	40.0%	48.9%
A level	36.4%	35.7%

(source: calculated from Department for Education and Skills and National Office of Statistics figures)

At A level, a different pattern emerged, with a lower proportion of the cohort sitting Curriculum 2000 A levels in the first year of their introduction (2002) compared with the old style examinations in 2001. Although the figures are not yet available for 2003, there is some evidence that the proportion of 18 year olds may have been higher in 2003 than in 2002, as the number of A level entries increased beyond what would be expected on the basis of the increase in the size of the 18 year old cohort. Nonetheless, the drop in the entry in summer 2002 was an unintended consequence of the introduction of Curriculum 2000.

² 29th International Association for Educational Assessment conference, 5th-10th October 2003, Manchester.

Students were expected to take more AS subjects than A level subjects so, within any particular subject, it was expected that the AS entry in 2001 might be higher than the A level entry in 2002. That fewer students overall would opt to take A levels in Curriculum 2000 than in the past was not predicted. As the examinations are graded subject by subject, it was only after the first few examination results began to be graded that it became apparent that something additional to the dropping of a fourth subject was taking place. Within subjects, evidence emerged that students were electing to drop subjects if they had a poor result for the AS part of the examination. Pinot de Moira (2002) investigated the characteristics of students' AS grades, comparing those who had continued to A level study and those who had stopped their study for a particular subject at AS (Table 2). Students who opted to stop studying a particular subject at AS had performed far worse than those who went on to A level. Further, those students who decided to continue their study had, as a group, outperformed the predictions of their grades made on the basis of the previous relationship between prior achievement and A level performance. Many of the old style A level examinations were modular in structure, so students also got feedback in those examinations regarding their performances as they took modules throughout the course, yet the selective pattern of entry for A level was not observed. A key difference was the fact that students could be issued with a certificate at AS in Curriculum 2000, which allowed students to exit study with something to show for it, even if it was not a high grade. For those students who were going to fail at A level, there was an early warning signal and an opportunity to exit with honour, as there was a decision point for all students following the AS results.

Table 2 Overall AQA AS subject grade distribution for candidates continuing to A Level and for those stopping at AS³

	A	B	C	D	E
Continuing to A Level	29.3	54.0	76.8	91.7	98.7
Stopping at AS	4.0	14.5	32.7	55.1	75.6

Credit from the AS examinations constituted 50% of the A level, so students' achievements at AS produced better A level grades. Subject-by-subject entry patterns indicated that there were fewer weak performing students carrying on their studies to A level and if standards were to be maintained from the previous year, it was expected that the overall A level results would be better than in summer 2001. This was the pattern found in the national level statistics produced by the Joint Council for General Qualifications (Table 3).

Table 3 Cumulative percentage at each A level grade at national level

Year	A	B	C	D	E	<i>n</i>
2002	20.7	42.6	65.3	83.4	94.3	701,380
2001	18.6	37.9	59.3	77.4	89.8	748,866
2002-2001	+2.1	+4.7	+6.0	+6.0	+4.5	-47,486

Pinot de Moira (2002) also noted a national rise in the entry at AS of 29% in summer 2002. Operational figures for AQA examinations produced by Eason indicated that candidates aged over 17 represented a lower proportion of AS candidates in summer 2001 (17%) than in

summer 2002 or summer 2003 (29% in both years). In some cases, it appeared that students were opting to take a further one year AS course in a different subject, rather than continue to A level with a subject they had begun studying the previous year.

However, figures indicating the pattern of students' choices of study were not easy to come by, as national figures at candidate level have to be matched across the Awarding Bodies. Once such figures are amassed, the complexity of the Curriculum 2000 structure can mean that they are difficult to interpret. One difficulty stems from the fact that approximately one fifth of AQA A level candidates chose not to certificate with an AS qualification (Eason, 2003), waiting instead for the full A level qualification. Also, students can request their AS certificates at the same time as their A level certificates or even in a winter session half way through their first, or more likely, their second year of study. Further interpretational difficulties are posed by candidates being able to decline a subject level result and re-sit units (Al-Bayatti and Jones, 2003). Thus, direct interpretation of AS and A level results is not straightforward. None of the statistics that could be produced helped us to see the student experience and how they were choosing what route to take through the options available to them, so a questionnaire study was carried out to find out how they made their decisions. The survey was conducted in the first weeks of term in autumn 2002, which should have been the time at which students were deciding which options to select.

Questionnaire

A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. A random sample was drawn of 100 centres who entered candidates for AQA A level English. The Head of each centre was asked to arrange for 20 candidates to complete the questionnaire and to return them to us. Note that candidates were likely to have entered for examinations with Awarding Bodies other than AQA as centres typically use more than a single Awarding Body.

Results and discussion

Fifty of the 100 centres returned at least one questionnaire, with 665 candidates completing the questionnaire in total and 662 being included in the dataset after cleaning. The average number of responses per centre was 13.3, with over half (57%) of respondents being female. Most students (509) said that they wanted to go on to University when they completed their A levels. A very small number (52) wanted to get a job and a larger number (103) wanted to go on to other things, such as vocational training or a year out.

A large proportion of students who responded to the questionnaire (48%) had taken four subjects in their first year of study (Figure 1) and three subjects in their second (65%: Figure 2), as was the expected pattern of entry for Curriculum 2000. Spours, Savory & Hodgson (2000) report that a Department for Education and Skills survey undertaken in 1999 showed that 90% of students took three or fewer A level qualifications in the old style curriculum. The comparative figure in this survey is 84%, but the difference could simply signal a difference in sampling rather than an effect of Curriculum 2000.

³ These data are not complete as they represent only candidates for whom there was a complete set of marks at the time of the award meeting. They also include AS module results from summer 2002 and are not, therefore, a true representation of the information candidates have when they make their decision to proceed to A Level.

Figure 1 Number of AS/VCE subjects taken in the first year of study by students who responded

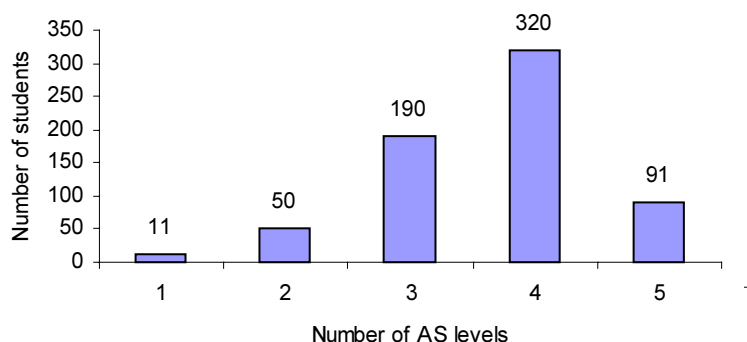
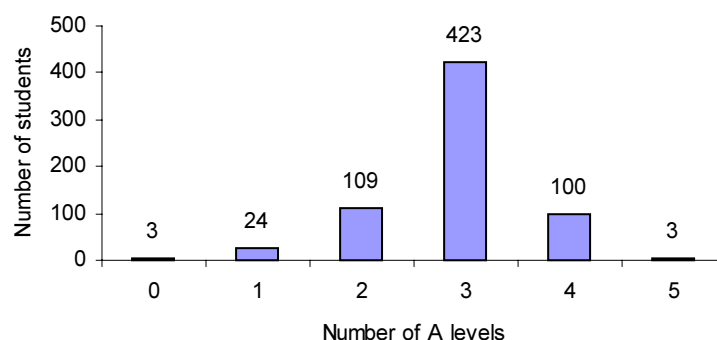


Figure 2 Number of A level/VCE subjects taken in the second year of study by students who responded



Examination bodies have collected teachers' estimated grades for a number of years (for example see Dhillon, 2003), but students have rarely been asked about how their grades compared with their expectations. In keeping with research on teachers' estimated grades, students' estimates were optimistic (Table 4). Of course, these estimates were produced after students had sat their examinations and were likely to have been influenced not only by the timing and the provision of actual results, but also by teachers' estimates of their likely grades, which may have been known to them. Interestingly, males admitted to having been slightly more optimistic than did females.

Table 4 Relationship between students' estimates and actual AS grades

Estimates were ...	Males	Females	Overall
optimistic	46%	43%	45%
accurate	35%	35%	35%
pessimistic	19%	22%	21%

Perhaps not surprisingly, very few students thought that the AS examinations were easy (Table 5), although half of them felt that the examination standard was about right. For a large proportion of students, the examinations were felt to be difficult. In choosing subjects to study further, students may have been influenced by how difficult the subject was for them,

particularly if they had under-performed compared with their estimate of the grade they would attain.

Table 5 Proportion of students who thought AS examinations were easy, difficult or of the right standard

	Frequency	Per cent
Easy	11	1.7
About right	326	50.0
Difficult	315	48.3
Total	652	100.0

Most of the AS entries resulted in continued study in the second year (77%; see Table 6). Students were more likely to drop subjects in which they received their worst grade, according to the results of a logistic regression ($p < 0.0001$; Appendix B). Subjects that produced students' worst grade were dropped in only half of the cases (Table 6), but subjects that did not produce students' worst grade were much less likely to be dropped.

Table 6 Number of entries that had the worst grade for a particular candidate cross-tabulated with the continuation or dropping of the subject in the second year of study

	Continued	Dropped	Total
Not worst grade subject	1525	237	1762
Worst grade subject	340	314	654
Total	1865	551	2416

Most frequently, the reason given by students for dropping a subject was that they had planned to do so (Table 7). Not needing the subject for University entrance was also mentioned frequently and could be closely linked to planning to drop the subject. An unexpectedly poor grade was another reason frequently cited. Pragmatic reasons were also given: some institutions did not offer the subject at A level and some students did not need to continue with the subject to gain entrance to University. Of course, some students found that they did not like the subject they had studied to AS, with comments such as 'it was really boring' being made. Others reported problems with the teaching staff for particular subjects.

Table 7 Reasons given by students for dropping a subject

Planned to drop it	229
Unexpectedly poor grade	106
Not needed for University entrance	77
Did not like it	65
Other	37
Too hard	36
School does not offer it at A2	13
Problem with teacher	11

Approximately two thirds of the students said that they decided themselves which subjects to study in the second year, but many also took advice from teachers. Parents were a source of advice that was reported as a factor in the decision making in a minority of cases, but parents

were cited more frequently than friends and only two students said that any materials from examination boards impacted upon their choice. These findings were perhaps surprising since it might have been expected that peer advice would have been more prominent in this age group.

Table 8 **How students decided which subjects to continue studying**
(students could give more than one response)

Advice from:	No.
Decided themselves	442
Teacher	259
Parents	90
Friend	31
Other	11
Exam board	2

Twenty per cent of students who responded to the questionnaire took a new AS subject in their second year and 3% took a second new AS subject. The new subjects spanned the spectrum, but the most popular ones were General Studies, Psychology and Business Studies. Very few students (4) said they were doing this because it was easier than doing A2, with 75 out of 133 students responding that they simply wanted to study another subject. University requirements and career choice were popular reasons listed when students indicated that they had another reason for choosing a new subject to study. In 2001, a Universities and Colleges Admissions Service survey showed that 13% of students were taking an additional AS in their second year of study (UCAS/QCA, 2001). The discrepancy between this figure and the 20% figure in the current research could simply be due to sampling or the proportion of students taking an additional AS in their second year of study may have increased between 2001 and 2002: certainly, the proportion of students who were aged over 17 taking AS examinations increased from 17% to 29% in that period.

Students' reactions to media coverage of the examination results

Students received the questionnaires in early September 2002, when the media interest in examination results appeared to have waned. However, as indicated earlier, press coverage of allegations regarding the standards of the examinations soon became prominent and a Public Inquiry was announced, which could have influenced students' responses to this particular question on the questionnaire. Responses were split into those made before and after 19th September (when the Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced the first review of grading: at that stage in only one Awarding Body), but there was little difference in the attitudes, categorised as positive, negative or neutral, to the media coverage before or after this point, so responses were analysed collectively. Two thirds of the responses were negative towards the media, with typical comments as indicated below.

“Awful – increased confusion and decreased value of grades.”

“I think the media are completely wrong. I worked very hard for the grades I got – no way were they easy!”

“I was disappointed that the media claimed exams were getting easier, because I thought the exams were actually very difficult.”

These education system stakeholders were generally not supportive of the media coverage of the examination results. Students commented repeatedly about the amount of work they had put into their examination results and how disheartened they felt when reading the press statements about the examinations being too easy. However, sixteen per cent of responses were positive about the media coverage, writing comments like “Really good – it informed the public of other results” and “It was thorough and comprehensive.” The remainder of comments were neutral, with statements such as “It was OK” being made.

General discussion

Students’ responses to the questionnaire indicated that they did not think the AS examinations were too easy. The most popular reason for dropping a subject was that the student had always planned to drop it, with an unexpectedly poor grade being the second most frequently given reason. Nonetheless, poor grades and a disparity between the grades students expected and attained were statistically linked to subjects being dropped for the second year of study. Approximately one third of students’ estimates of their AS examination results were accurate, with 45% being optimistic. Optimism in this respect is shared with teachers, whose estimates also tend to be optimistic (Dhillon, 2003). Students were largely negative regarding the media coverage of the summer 2002 examination results, feeling that it undermined their achievements.

Following the publication of summer 2003 results, some commentators (eg John Dunford of the Secondary Heads Association, *The Guardian* 26 August 2003) suggested that students were switching to ‘easier’ subjects. Looking at the entry figures alone, it would appear that some subjects have had a dramatic increase in entry – A level Psychology entries rose from approximately 31 000 for the old style examinations to 41 000 in summer 2003. This subject was particularly targeted as being perceived to be too easy, with statistical arguments being put forward by its critics. Much has been written on inter-subject comparability and the adequacy or otherwise of statistical approaches (eg Goldstein and Cresswell, 1996) and the topic is being considered at a workshop at this conference (Jones, Philips and van Krieken). Setting aside the technical issues, an investigation of the entry figures show that there has, in fact, been little change in the proportion of the entry for any given year by subject (Appendix C). In only four subjects has there been a change of the share of the entry for A level of more than one per cent. General Studies has seen a decline in its share of the entry by 3.9% from 11.7% in 2001 to 7.8% in 2003. No doubt the public perception of the difficulty of the new Mathematics curriculum influenced the decline in its share of the entry from 8.8% in 2001 to 7.5% in 2003. Psychology’s share increased by 1.4% and Media/Film/TV studies increased by 1.1%. The changes for General Studies, Mathematics and Media/Film/TV studies largely occurred in the first year of introduction of the Curriculum 2000 A levels (2002), but for Psychology half of the increase occurred in 2002 and half occurred in 2003. Overall, one would have to conclude that entries by subject had changed little since the introduction of Curriculum 2000, but it may be that over time there will be trends of increasing or decreasing entries for particular subjects.

Curriculum 2000 may have increased participation of students at least to age 17, but it appears that in the first year of introduction of A level, it had the unintended, beneficial consequence of weeding out students who were likely to have failed the examination (Table 9). In this respect, Curriculum 2000 may have had the unintended consequence of sharpening students’ decision making regarding which subjects to study and whether to continue them for a second year. An Office for Standards in Education report (2003, page 6) concludes that “many students choose to do relatively narrow ‘suites’ of subjects.” Although

there has not been much evidence from wider research of students mixing vocational with academic style qualifications or studying across different subject areas (such as science plus arts subjects), as intended by the Government, there has been a broadening of students' study to four AS subjects in the first year and taking of additional AS subjects in the second year in some cases.

Table 9 Consequences of Curriculum 2000 on students' choice of study

Intended	Unintended
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible increase in participation rate at age 17 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased number of 18 year olds taking A levels in 2002
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadening of study to four AS subjects most popular pattern of study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved students' choice of subjects to those that they were best at
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadening of study to further AS subjects in second year of study
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little broadening of study over different subject areas (Ofsted, 2003)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little broadening of study over different qualification types (Ofsted, 2003)

September 2003

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Appendix A Questionnaire



A level student questionnaire

AQA is interested in how you have made your choices about which subjects to continue studying this year. We would, therefore, be grateful if you would complete this questionnaire and return it in the pre-paid envelope provided by **Friday 20th September 2002**. Any information you provide on this questionnaire is anonymous and will be treated confidentially in accordance with AQA's Research Code of Practice.

About you

Please tell us about yourself:

- 1. What is your date of birth? _____ / _____ / _____
- 2. Are you male or female? Male Female

Your AS results

- 3. Please complete the table below to let us know what subjects you took at **AS**, what grades you got and what grades you expected to get.

AS Subject	Actual grade	I expected to get a grade

- 4. In general, do you think the **AS** exams were ... ?
Please tick one box: easy about right difficult

Your choices for this year

5. Please complete the table below to let us know what subjects you have decided to study at **A level** this year?

Subject(s)

6. If you have dropped any of your **AS** subjects, what were the reasons?
(you can tick more than one box)

- I always planned to drop that subject after AS.
- I don't need that subject for university entrance.
- I didn't do as well as I expected at AS.
- It was my worst AS result.
- Other: please give reason(s) below:

7. If you plan to re-sit any of your AS exams, please let us know why below:
(You can tick more than one box).

- To improve my AS grade.
- To improve my A Level grade.
- Other: please let us know what in the space below:

8. Who advised you to re-sit your examinations? (You can tick more than one box).

- No-one. I decided myself
- Parent(s)
- Teacher(s)
- Friend(s)
- Examination Board
- Other: Please let us know in the space below:

9. Please list any **AS** subjects which you will be studying this year that you did **NOT** study last year. (*If you have no subjects to list, go on to question 11.*)

Subject(s)

10. Why have you decided to study a new **AS** subject in your second year of study? (*You can tick more than one box*)

It is easier than doing the second year of A level.

I wanted to study another subject.

Other: please let us know what in the space below:

11. Have any of your friends decided to drop out of school/college following their AS results, rather than continue studying?

Please tick one box: Yes No

(*If you ticked 'no' please go on to question 13.*)

12. If you ticked 'yes' above, please let us know why you think they have dropped out: (*you can tick more than one box*)

They never really wanted to stay on at school after GCSE anyway.

They got a job.

They got bad results at AS.

The school/college has entry requirements for A level and they were not allowed to stay on.

They went to another school/college to study another course.

Other: please let us know what in the space below:

13. What did you think of the media coverage of the AS and A level results in August this year?

14. What do you intend to do when you finish your A levels? (*Please tick one box.*)

Go to university.

Get a job.

Other: please let us know what in the space below.

Please use the space below to let us know anything else that you think we should know about how you have made your exam choices for this year.

**Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions.
We appreciate your help.**

Please return the completed questionnaire by **Friday 20th September 2002** to Jo-Anne Baird, Research Department, Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, Stag Hill House, Guildford, Surrey, GU2 7XJ, in the enclosed pre-paid envelope.

Appendix B Logistic regression results

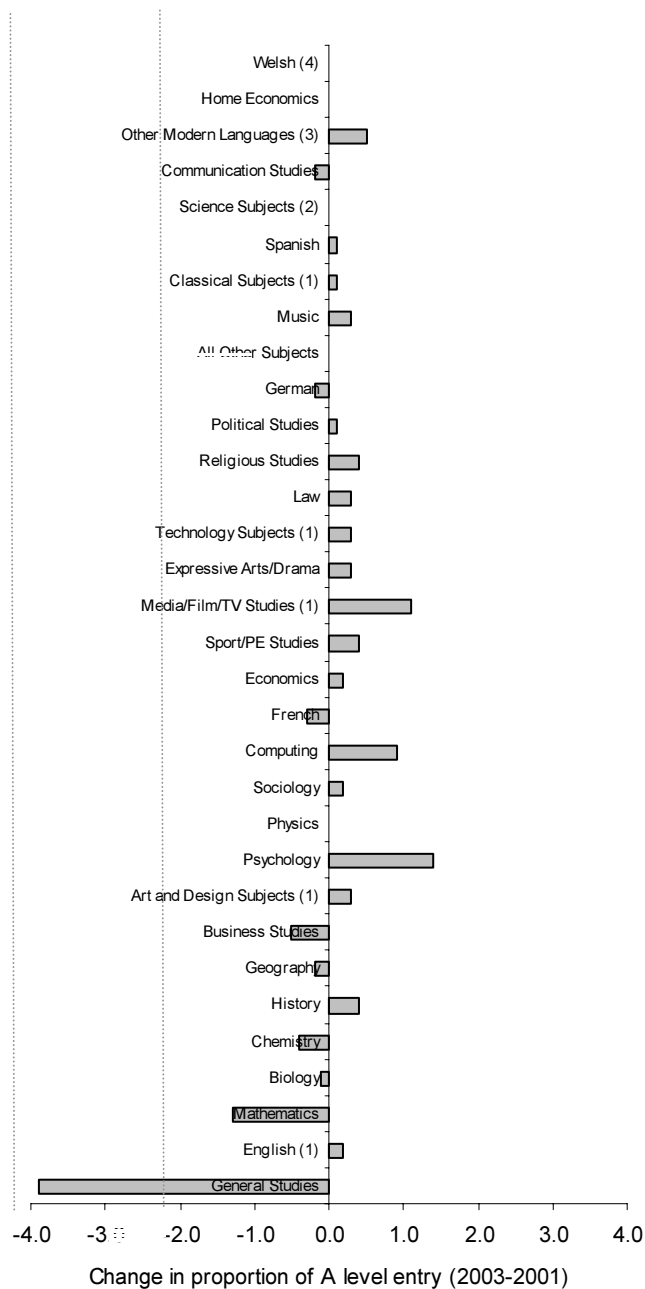
Logistic regression with

- dropped subject as the dependent variable (1=dropped, 0=continued) and
- worst subject as the independent variable (worst: subject with worst grade=1, other=0).

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
WORST	1.782	0.105	288.701	1	0.000	5.943
Constant	-1.862	0.070	710.930	1	0.000	0.155

Appendix C Change in the proportion of overall A level entry by subject at national level between 2001 and 2003



- (1) - These titles cover a range of related subjects
- (2) - Science includes all science subjects except Biology, Chemistry and Physics
- (3) - Other Modern Languages includes all languages except French, German, Spanish and Welsh
- (4) - Welsh includes Welsh (First Language) and Welsh (Second Language)

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