

WORK, WORK, WORK!

Students' perceptions of study and
work-life balance under Curriculum 2000

REPORT 2002

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FOREWARD

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) welcomed the introduction of Curriculum 2000 in September 2000, the purpose of which was to reform the post-16 curriculum. We saw the principles of this reform as a step in the right direction. We also supported the underlying purpose of the reforms, which were intended to promote higher levels of achievement, to encourage students to undertake broader programmes and to improve flexibility in the post-16 curriculum. The developments included improved vocationally-related qualifications and an underpinning of key skills throughout the post-16 curriculum.

Some months into the implementation of this initiative, however, ATL recognised that there were a number of difficulties in delivering Curriculum 2000. In response to concerns expressed at Conference about the resulting stress on students, ATL took the opportunity to undertake a survey of a small sample of post-16 students in order to investigate the impact that this initiative has had on their lifestyle.

We hope that the findings outlined in this report may be a helpful contribution to debate around future reforms.

Julie Grant

President of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2001-2002

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The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) has investigated students' experiences of Curriculum 2000 (C2000), their response to the new curriculum and, in particular:

- whether C2000 means that they are studying a broader and well-balanced curriculum
- whether the reforms, together with patterns of part-time working, have combined to enrich learning or to create pressures in their work-life balance.

A total of 77 students (in the first term of Year 13) participated in the survey that was conducted in institutions in urban and rural areas in England and Wales.

Findings

- The first cohort of C2000 was faced with what was perceived to be a larger workload than that experienced by previous post-16 students. Students were studying between one and two more subjects than their predecessors at the school and college. Most were happy with their choice of subjects.
- For the majority, expectations had been high. A few had no particular expectations.

Study programmes

- Timetabled hours varied from 15-22 (averaging 17 hours per week) plus five hours of private/supported study. Students varied widely in their homework habits in Year 12, reporting between zero and four hours per day in the week and zero to six over the weekend. Girls put in noticeably more time working at home than boys.
- A recurrent comment was that key skills were a 'waste of time' or 'pointless'. However, students in colleges gave key skills a more positive rating. Some students discovered – particularly at university interviews – that key skills were not included in the entry requirements for many universities.
- Students reported not seeing enrichment as an important part of their Year 12 experience. Their priority was to do the work which earned a qualification. Enrichment was therefore pushed into a peripheral position.
- Most of those who chose to have what they considered to be a reasonable social life reported that they did so at the expense of enrichment studies.

Part-time work

- A minority of the students in the focus groups had no part-time job. The others spent between four and 30 hours on part-time work. A few complained that employers demanded more hours than was reasonable for an A-level student undertaking work that was not related to their study programme.

- Paid work allowed them independence, purchasing power and confidence as well as an opportunity to take on an adult role that they seemed to appreciate as part of the transition they were going through.
- Part-time working was an embedded part of the culture for most of the young people in this survey.

Workload

- The majority of students found Year 12 burdensome.
- It is clear that four AS subjects in Year 12 have become an accepted norm through the introduction of C2000. Students select an additional subject in which they are interested or which links to their academic pathway. For some students, four subjects meant that there was not enough time to focus on any one in depth.
- In some cases, irritation was caused by the pressure of studying for a subject that would then be dropped. This extra work seemed pointless to the students.
- It is less clear that the principle of broadening has had any real impact on students' thinking.
- The workload of students of the arts and humanities (between two to three essays per week) appears to be greater than for those taking mathematics and sciences.

Examinations

- The main complaint was that there were many exams in a short period of time, with students then having to return to lessons.
- Some students would finish an exam and proceed immediately to a lesson.
- Students found the AVCE exams difficult. The specifications did not show any 'AS equivalent' point relating to one year of study.
- Students who were taking January modules felt an additional pressure on top of the pressures created by A2 work.

Implications for the reform process

- For the time being, there should not be dramatic changes to the AS/A2 programmes.
- Future reforms must be adequately piloted and evaluated before implementation, with teachers receiving thorough preparation and training.
- Policy-makers must take account of students' rejection of key skills in their current form.
- The assessment system has become dangerously overloaded. This is impeding student learning.

The Annual Conference of the Association of Teachers and lecturers (ATL) in 2001 debated the pressures that many teachers experienced in the first six months of the introduction of Curriculum 2000 (C200). While they appreciated that the initiative brought some benefits, C2000 contained serious weaknesses. Delegates expressed concern for the pupils/students who appeared to be experiencing as much stress as their teachers.

Since Easter 2001, there have been several developments: the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has reviewed C2000, and a series of reports have been published by the Institute of Education. In February 2002, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills published a Green Paper proposing further reforms to the 14-19 curriculum.

ATL made a commitment to investigate the students' experience of C2000 and their response to the new curriculumⁱ. We were interested in two issues in particular:

- whether C2000 means that students are studying a broader and well-balanced curriculum
- whether the reforms, together with patterns of part-time working, have combined to enrich learning or to create pressures in the work-life balance of students.

This report presents our findings.

Discussion groups of seven students on average were set up in 11 institutions that have been actively embracing C2000. A total of 77 students (at the time in their first term of Year 13) participated in the survey.

The institutions sampled exemplify a range of schools and colleges:

- schools – comprehensives, single-sex grammar, voluntary controlled, independent
- colleges – community (13-18 mixed) college, sixth form college, FE college.

One institution is based in Wales, and the others in urban and rural areas throughout Englandⁱⁱ.

The students were selected to achieve a balance of:

- levels of attainment and subject areas studied
- general and vocational programmes studied
- gender ratio
- a number having key skills in their programmes.

(i) The terms of reference were to investigate: • the experiences of Curriculum 2000 students to ascertain their response to the new curriculum • whether student programmes in Curriculum 2000, which may combine with part-time work, can accommodate sufficient time for enrichment of learning as well as social and recreational activity • the issues of work-life balance and pressures encountered by the first cohort.

(ii) We planned a discussion group in Northern Ireland, but it did not meet.

The design of the groups was intended to avoid single friendship groupings.

A key feature in the design of this research has been the involvement of teachers and lecturers as researchers. ATL staff designed the research and the schedule of questions for the focus groups. Teachers in schools and colleges then organised and conducted the focus groups, using the criteria set out above, and, in addition, reported back the results in a qualitative form. Some individual students completed a short questionnaire.

3.1 Choice of subjects

Our sample showed that 36 of the Year 12ⁱⁱⁱ students took four subjects, 19 took five subjects and 11 took three subjects. (11 did not submit details.) Students clearly saw themselves as having taken the four to five subjects in response to the school's C2000 guidance and timetabling arrangements, and the perceived expectations of the university entry requirements. Students appeared to accept quite happily that they studied between one and two subjects more than their predecessors at the school and college. Indeed, in one school, students expressed a view that they had hoped that C2000 would produce a Baccalaureate-style approach, giving students the opportunity to study at least six subjects.

From the information that students provided, it appears that most were happy with their choice of subjects.

3.2 Careers education and guidance

Guidance had been provided by a variety of methods. For some, this formed part of tutor time, while for others an induction or active careers guidance had been set up. The overall picture of careers guidance appears to be patchy. Some students acknowledged the availability of careers guidance but felt they had not needed any. Guidance on subject content and AS/A2 structure was rated by the students as 'OK' to 'good'. On the other hand, careers guidance on the combination of subjects and careers pathways was described as 'adequate' to 'poor'.

3.3 Expectations

For the majority, expectations had been high. Some told us that they had expected the year's work to be less difficult than the previous style A-levels. A few had no particular expectations.

(iii) Year 12 = students in the first year of C2000 in any institution.

4.1 Allocated time

Timetabled hours per week ranged from 15-22 hours in almost all institutions plus an average of five hours private/supported study. One institution was reported as having 30 timetabled hours per week. The variation in total hours can be accounted for by the hours allocated to each subject, the number of subjects studied, and whether or not key skills, general studies, private study and enrichment activities appear on the timetable. AVCEs tend to carry a heavier contact time than AS or A2.

4.2 Unallocated time

In some institutions, free time was spent in the student social area or studying privately. Some students found it hard to study in the common room because there were so many distractions. These included friends being free, a peer pressure to socialise, or the social area being very inviting. Some AVCE students felt a need to relax in free time because of their heavy lesson/coursework schedule (which is different from AS students). A few students admitted that they found free time hard to handle if they lacked time management skills.

4.3 Evenings and weekends

Students reported that they spent an average of two hours each evening on study programmes, with girls putting in noticeably more time at home than boys.

The students spent between zero and six hours working on study programmes at the weekend. Some students dedicated the weekends to extra work, leaving themselves free during the week. Others did extra work during the week, leaving the weekends for part-time work.

One student, studying three subjects and not engaging in key skills, did no homework in the evenings or weekends. She worked 13 hours in a part-time job.

4.4 Access to computers

Access to computers, both at home and at school, was considered 'good' by all. In a minority of cases, access at school was sometimes difficult because of high demand and incompatible networks. The only student in this survey who did not have a computer at home had had access at school.

5.1 Enrichment activities

A wide range of enrichment activities were reported. Students participated in activities such as the Young Enterprise Scheme, the Duke of Edinburgh Award, the Sports Leadership Award, the Young Consumer of the Year, the Bar Mock Trial, the Youth Parliament, community service, peer counselling, work experience, Islamic Studies, dancing, sign language, First Aid, drama and exercise. Some students were members of sports teams. In many institutions, students were allocated space in their weekly timetable for community studies/voluntary work.

Repeatedly, students in this survey reported that they did not see this kind of enrichment activity as an important part of their Year 12 experience. Examinations and other subject requirements would often encroach on this time, making it difficult to give real commitment. There was genuine concern about taking this time when really the students felt that they should have been working on their examination subject. Enrichment was pushed into a peripheral position. Some commented that it was therefore harder than anyone had expected to fulfil the requirements of the UCAS personal statement in terms of outside interests and extra-curricular activities. In addition, 19 of the students in the sample took one or more key skills qualifications. We comment on this in paragraph 5.2.

Furthermore, some students did not make time to arrange their own work experience programmes – this activity suffered as a result. The Young Enterprise Scheme was highly valued by the students as a good support to subjects studied, and some felt that this activity was rushed because of time pressures.

5.2 Key skills

A recurrent comment from students in the survey was that key skills were a ‘waste of time’ or ‘pointless’. In different institutions, interestingly, students were either required to or discouraged from including key skills in their programmes. In some cases it is apparent from the students’ comments that a few teachers did not have a good grasp of how to teach the skills nor what the assessment requirements were – *Application of number* was avoided when possible. Students discovered later in the course – particularly after university interviews – that key skills were not included in the entry requirements for many universities. However, students in colleges gave key skills a more positive rating. Some college students succeeded at level 3 in the key skills qualifications.

5.3 Tutor groups

These groups were described by the students as valuable for boosting their morale and helping them to fill in UCAS forms.

A minority (seven) of the students in the focus groups had no part-time job, two reporting that they did not need to earn money and four saying that they were not able to fit in any employment alongside their workload. The father of one student advised him to put all his efforts into the course – he was willing to support him financially.

The remaining students spent between four and 30 hours per week on part-time work. Some confined working to one or two days at the weekend. A few complained that employers had demanded more hours than was reasonable for an A-level student to do. Rates of pay were between £3.20-£7.50 per hour.

The majority of students reported that their part-time work did not relate to their study programmes. Some initially did not relate paid work to C2000 but later were able to identify the value of paid employment in developing communication and social skills. A college student reported that his employment was used as a case study for his business studies course.

The following four exceptional cases were reported:

- one student started work at a hotel at 5am
- one student with a strong entrepreneurial bent had three part-time jobs, earning in total £97.50 per week
- one college student earned £9.60 per hour in a laboratory. Previously a work experience placement, the employer retained her. She intended to keep this link at university and will return after graduating
- one self-employed school student designed websites for which he was paid a considerable amount. Commission from his Nokia site was several hundred pounds per month. He also managed a site for a local builders' merchant.

All students who worked did so for the money. Paid work allowed them independence, purchasing power and confidence as well as an opportunity to take on an adult role that they seemed to appreciate as part of the transition they were going through.

A minority decreased the number of hours in their part-time work as exam pressures increased. Several thought that time had to be managed very carefully to prevent part-time work from having a detrimental effect on the Year 12 work.

At one focus group, the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced into the discussion. (Students who qualify for EMA can receive up to £30 per week.) Students explained that in order to qualify for the allowance, those entitled to the EMA had to attend school or college regularly and also had to meet set targets of achievement. If these targets are met, a bonus is paid at the end of each term followed

by an additional bonus at the end of the year. Students felt it was most unfair that some received the EMA whilst others did not. As one student put it: *'I'm working so hard yet get no EMA'*. Another student indicated on the questionnaire: *'If we had EMA we could work fewer hours and spend more time studying for higher grades'*. Students recognised a tension here.

7 SOCIAL LIFE

Most students who chose to have what they considered to be a reasonable social life reported that they did so at the expense of enrichment studies, rather than at the expense of studying for the taught curriculum. The most popular activities in their free time were the following:

- socialising with friends and family
- clubbing and going to pubs for group socialising
- watching television, particularly soaps.

It was noticeable that girls reported spending little time using computers for personal enjoyment, while boys spent a significant amount of their leisure time on computers. Cinema-going was on average once or twice a month. Reading for pleasure was negligible – a few never read for pleasure. As one student put it: *'A drawback of AS is that there is no time to read other than set texts, and weekends are taken up with jobs'*.

A few students reported membership of rugby, football, swimming and water polo clubs: two were playing for local teams, and one had trials for the Schoolboys' national team.

It appears that, where there is a culture of high grades, students spared little time for socialising or for other interests. Relaxing was not a high priority although the lack of it created a great deal of stress for the students. Playing musical instruments, attending different courses and a social life were all neglected and, to a smaller extent, study as well.

The majority of students found Year 12 burdensome. They report that the pressure was overwhelming at times, leading variously to fatigue, severe headaches, crying, panic, tension and episodes of depression. Symptoms built up as the exams approached. However, one student reported being immune to pressure!

In some cases irritation was caused by the pressure of studying for a subject that would then be dropped – this extra work seemed pointless to the students. The crowded examination timetable was continually cited as a cause of student stress.

Four students who had found the workload ‘stressful’ told us that they coped through a combination of tutor support/guidance and by taking time off to deal with coursework or other ‘hotspots’.

The workload of students of the arts and humanities (two to three essays per week) appeared to be greater than for those taking mathematics and sciences, which involved a smaller volume of homework and shorter time required to complete it. The downside of being given long deadlines was that the work could be ignored until the last minute, when panic would set in.

In a few institutions, the examination timetable and peripheral organisation had been disappointing and the late arrival of textbooks had been unhelpful.

It was not always clear to students how much time they should have spent on assignments with long deadlines, yet grades would often seem dependent on the amount of time spent. In some instances the pacing of the work was uneven – too much at some times, little at others. Four subjects meant that some students felt there was not enough time to focus on any one in depth. Lack of coordination of work between departments added to difficulties. One student of economics expressed anger over the number of teachers who had been involved in teaching the subject.

Coursework was ongoing right up to the exam, leaving insufficient time to revise. Weaker students clearly had had to work very hard to achieve passes. We gained some insight into the preferred learning styles of different students, for example one student reported hating the coursework element of exams which took up too much time; another student preferred coursework to taking an exam.

Coping strategies

The following coping strategies were reported:

- dropping one subject (weakest or heaviest in content)
- better time management (with help from tutors)

- reducing hours at part-time work
- discussing/negotiating deadlines with subject teachers
- giving up the course (parents agreed with proviso that it was replaced by an apprenticeship)
- help from mother
- going home to sleep in order to do more work in the evening
- going to the gym to work off tension.

Giving up socialising or part-time work was an option for only a small minority of the students.

One student said: *'I just got on and did the work. If you are not willing to do the work, you shouldn't be doing A-levels'.*

Two 'survivors' volunteered the following comments:

*'The workload is not unreasonable – there is always room to 'tweak' time management'
'I didn't like unreasonable workload, so I just did what I thought was reasonable'.*

All the students in our sample had been successful enough to continue with the second post-compulsory year. They were generally pleased with the results they received at the end of Year 12 but were inclined to think that the successes lulled them into a false sense of security. They had risen to the challenges but this was an extra year of exams that they had not anticipated.

9 LOOKING BACK AT YEAR 12

Some students were *'Glad to see the back of Year 12'.*

The majority of students felt that any difficulties in Year 12 had been overcome in Year 13. Examinations were considered 'too many' or 'hard to deal with' by a considerable number of students; the remainder thought them to be not as bad as they had feared. One student sat 18 exams in three weeks.

9.1 Year 12 exams

The main complaint was that there had been too many exams in a short period – some over one day – requiring an unreasonable amount of cramming. Students are now concerned about the recent changes in Year 12 for the three-hour exams, feeling that this new change would not solve the problem. It would mean having to revise every aspect of the subjects to be sure to deal with any question selected for the exam.

Some students found themselves finishing an exam, then proceeding to a lesson. One student described the exams as 'a hoop to jump through'.

With January resits now part of the AS process, one institution reported that an average student was taking between two and three resits, and some as many as seven or even ten. For other students, lessons were cancelled or felt to be pointless during the exam period.

Students found the AVCE exams difficult. The specifications did not show any 'AS equivalent' point relating to one year of study. The students therefore found that the exams demanded of them a high level of language and understanding that could only be adequately acquired over two years. In addition, some specifications had changed halfway through the year.

9.2 After the Year 12 exams

Some students had been apprehensive, others disappointed:

'I wish I had only done three AS levels as I feel that taking four meant that I did badly in all of them and I could have done better if I had only taken three'.

All students disliked having to get down to work again immediately after the AS unit summer exams and generally felt that they had worked less well at these times. Two students said that this was because of exhaustion.

For a significant few, pressures continue in Year 13 because there would not be time to retake modules before applying for university. Students who are taking January modules feel an additional pressure on top of the pressures created by A2 work. They are also worrying about possible problems with an overcrowded and badly spaced examination timetable in the summer of Year 13. Some suggested that clearer guidelines on resits and 'cashing in' would help them. Some students concluded that it is best not to rely too heavily on resits – they increase the pressures on Year 13 workload.

Failure in key skills was considered as a failing of the institution rather than a reflection on the ability of the students.

Mathematics students, who had another chance to sit the AS exam in the autumn, felt they had been given a small reprieve.

9.3 Breadth

Approximately half (28) of those students referred to in paragraph 3.1 were taking a mix of arts and science subjects; eight of these were engaged in key skills.

The remainder (26) were taking subjects complementary to each other. Overall, 34 of the students listed one vocational subject. Business studies was included in the majority of these cases. Key skills were included in the programmes of 19 students.

A few students thought breadth had been achieved. Those students who said breadth had not been achieved would have liked more options from which they could have chosen.

10 THE WISH LIST

The students were invited to offer suggestions for a wish list to improve arrangements for the next cohorts. The following wishes were suggested.

10.1 C2000 programmes

- C2000 to be clearer and better explained to both pupils and teachers.
- The content and level of the Vocational Certificate of Education (VCE) 'end of first year' examinations to be made clearer to teachers to avoid unnecessary over-teaching.
- In preparation for Year 13, Year 12 work to be more demanding – not necessarily in content, but in the level of challenge.
- Key skills to be either abolished or embedded.
- Keep AS levels – it is recognised qualification and a good one-year course for those not wanting to continue to A2.
- More modules, not all exams at the end of the year.
- Textbooks to be available before the course starts.
- Revert to the old tried and tested system.
- Not as many subjects.
- Wider choice of subjects.
- More practice exam papers and mock exams.
- Fewer pockets of high stress – these to be organised and spaced out.
- The jump from AS to A2 is still huge – first year loading to be reduced.

10.2 Advice to Year 11 students about post-16 programmes

- Work hard in the first term so that you don't fall behind.
- Revise in advance.

- Make sure that you choose subjects that you will enjoy.
- Expect hard work.
- It is essential to be organised from the beginning.
- Don't do key skills if they are in the same format as last year.
- Make sure that you research subjects and courses thoroughly.
- Make sure you use your study periods wisely.
- Don't do key skills – they are a waste of time and the exams are below GCSE standard work, so you don't learn anything. Universities don't want them.
- Be organised and be sure that you want to commit.
- Consider many places of education and be sure what you are letting yourself in for.
- It's good fun.
- Shadow subjects you're thinking of doing.
- Get involved with extra activities.
- Courses are a lot harder (eg, mathematics) than GCSE. Talk to your teacher before committing yourself.

11 CONCLUSIONS

11.1 Students' responses to C2000

The first cohort of C2000 was faced with what was perceived to be a larger workload than that experienced by previous post-16 students. Timetabled hours varied from 15-22, averaging 17 hours per week, plus five hours of private/supported study. Students varied widely in their homework habits in Year 12, reporting between zero to four hours per day in the week and zero to six over the weekend.

Students studying four subjects as well as key skills felt the workload was unreasonable. In particular, AVCEs were demanding and heavily loaded in content. They were viewed as more difficult than AS in general subjects.

- It is clear that four AS subjects in Year 12 have become an accepted norm through the introduction of C2000. This seems to have enabled students to select an additional subject in which they are interested or which links to their academic pathway. It is less clear that the principle of broadening has had any real impact on students' thinking.
- Most felt that guidance on subjects and content was fair to good. Guidance linking these to careers and to future pathways was adequate to poor.

- Arts and humanities generated more essays and homework than science and mathematics.
- A wide range of enrichment activities were reported as available in the centres, ranging from the Young Enterprise Scheme and Duke of Edinburgh Award to Islamic studies and drama. In practice, study for examinations would often encroach on this time. Most students gave enrichment a low priority in terms of their own time and planning despite the wide range of activities on offer.
- Many considered key skills as a 'waste of time' or 'pointless'. Three factors were seen as contributing to this view:
 - (i) the students were not being adequately prepared for what they see as a real qualification
 - (ii) some teachers did not have a good grasp of how to teach key skills. College students gave key skills a more positive evaluation than those in schools
 - (iii) university admissions tutors downplayed the importance of key skills at interviews.
- Students reported that they spent an average of two hours each evening on study programmes, with girls putting in noticeably more time at home than boys. They spent between zero and six hours working on study programmes at the weekend.
- Part-time working was an embedded part of the culture for most of the young people in this survey.
 - (i) They valued the earnings and the experience of working in a more adult role.
 - (ii) For the most part work had not had any connection with the subjects studied.
 - (iii) Hours in employment varied from four to 30 hours a week, with an average of approximately nine hours.
- Students reported that friends and family were the most important aspect of their social life – few read for pleasure.
- Most students found that Year 12 had put them under heavy pressure. This was partly because of the demands of the new curriculum arrangements, partly because of a lack of coordination between departments or subjects and partly because of the intensity of, or the 'bottlenecks' in, the examinations.
- At times, some students experienced what they expressed as panic, tension, worry and anxiety attacks because of the pressures. But here attitudes and responses varied between those who just learnt to work very hard and those who found the pressures difficult to resolve.

11.2 Implications for the reform process

- For the time being, there should not be dramatic changes to the AS/A2 programmes. Any necessary change should be only to make the programmes easier to manage for both teachers and students.
- Once the lessons of C2000 have been learnt, these lessons should provide a firm foundation for future reforms.
- Future reforms must be adequately piloted and evaluated before implementation, with teachers receiving thorough preparation and training. Teacher uncertainty transfers negatively to students.
- A broader curriculum of a Baccalaureate type, with more structured choice, might well be acceptable to students. This implies a ten-year programme of reforms. Given that the overwhelming majority of students are likely to enter part-time employment, greater coherence in the learning programme may only be achievable if wider aspects of experience are incorporated into a certification.
- Policy-makers must take account of students' rejection of key skills in their current form.
- Students reported that they spent an average of two hours each evening on study programmes, with girls putting in noticeably more time at home than boys.
- The assessment system has become dangerously overloaded. This is impeding student learning.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) exists to promote the cause of education generally in the UK and elsewhere, to protect and improve the status of teachers and lecturers, and to further their legitimate and professional interests.

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