



A-LEVELS

Choosing the best

by Martin McElwee

The Bow Group

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SUMMARY

- The A-level system is failing. Government pressure to increase pass rates has led to falling standards.
- An exclusive Bow Group survey of 100 academics at leading universities has shown that 90 per cent of university academics believe that a grade A at A-level is worth less than it was worth 10 years ago. 49 per cent think that academic standards have declined over the past 10 years.
- Universities now prefer qualifications which they know to be more rigorous than the A-level. This is epitomised by the rise of the International Baccalaureate. But most IB students in the UK are at independent or selective schools. The losers are pupils in bog standard comprehensives who are stuck with a degraded exam.
- Examination boards should be encouraged to differentiate their offerings, so that an Edexcel A-level is known to be different from an OCR A-level. Some of these might be “premium” exams, offering more academic rigour. Some might be more practically-based exams.
- Schools must be free to choose between these exams (or, say, the IB or the Scottish Higher) according to what is best for their pupils. This will provide a structural guarantee of standards – if a “premium” examination board drops its standards, schools will simply stop sitting its exams as it will no longer offer any advantage.
- Parents should be offered true school choice so that they can choose a school with exams that best suit their children.

CHAPTER 1

A SYSTEM DESTINED TO FAIL

A-levels were first awarded in 1951. Then, they were considered the “gold standard”, marking out the relatively small proportion of students likely to go on to university. Their natural selectivity meant that even the fact that they were awarded only at “pass” and “distinction” grades did not mean that they were too blunt an instrument to provide the necessary differentiation. The very possession of A-levels differentiated their holder.

In 1963, the examining body introduced a more familiar grading system. This system initially provided that a roughly fixed proportion of each cohort was awarded each grade. Roughly 10% got grade A, 15% grade B, 10% grade C, 15% grade D, 20% grade E and a further 20% a compensatory O-level.

This approach – though far from immune to criticism – did at least mean that it was possible to use the A-level as a tool for differentiating between students. Universities and employers could rely on the achievement of higher grades as a clear pointer that the holder was in the upper percentiles of their peers.

Its claim to relative fairness relied on the assumption that the common standard of achievement did not vary substantially year upon year. Under such a system there was no imperative to lower standards to encourage better pass rates: pass rates were supposed to be almost exactly the same year on year. This was a structural guarantee of the maintenance of standards.

But flaws in the system are obvious. It may be unfair in a year that contains a particularly high level of achievement, particularly in a subject (perhaps nowadays such as Latin) where a relatively small number of students sit the exam and those who do are above average achievers. Moreover, it has no means of representing rising levels of achievement over time. Should schools succeed in raising the general standard of knowledge or achievement across the cohort – or indeed, if the totality of the student peer group is induced to work harder by societal or other factors – there can necessarily be no reflection of this in the grades achieved. These criticisms were widely taken up within the education establishment.

In 1984, it was recommended that marking should stop using fixed proportions of candidates and change to using fixed proportions of the marking scale. This was introduced in 1987 and was designed to be part of a move towards criterion referencing, where the achievement of certain fixed criteria result in the award of marks. Nowadays, examiner discretion is used to determine the number of marks which will qualify for grades A, C and E, with the remaining grade points determined mathematically between these. All candidates who reach the required number of marks get the relevant grade.

This system seems superficially fairer. Crucially, it seeks to reward achievement rather than differentiate between candidates.

Its greatest problem is that it contains a structural subjectivity and, it seems, a propensity towards grade inflation. The very setting of the criteria against which achievement is assessed or the setting of the marks which constitute the pass mark at each grade is necessarily subjective and prone to inconsistency. This is doubly the case in humanities, arts and social science subjects.

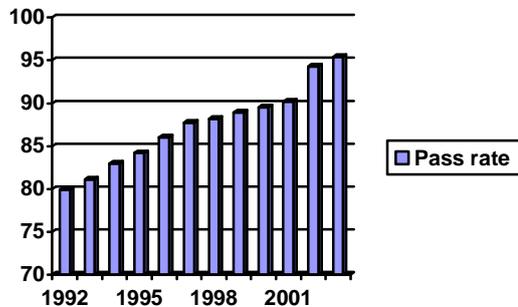
The biggest jump in pass rates arrived with the introduction of the Labour government's new A-level structure in the 2002 exam diet. This followed the introduction of an entirely modular curriculum in 2000 – allowing candidates to take modules over the two year duration of the course (and resit as necessary¹) rather than take a single examination at the end of the two years covering all aspects of the course. The A-level was effectively divided into two parts – the AS level and the A2 level.

The resulting leap in pass rates in 2002 led to the emergence of a marking scandal, with allegations that some scripts had been deliberately marked down to prevent further controversy about rising pass rates. The Government sacked the head of the QCA, Sir William Stubbs, and instituted the Tomlinson inquiry, the various suggestions of which are discussed below.

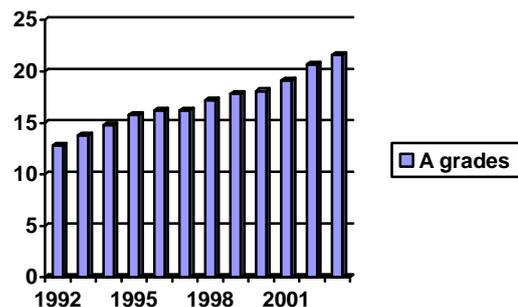
¹ This had similarly been possible under the pre-Curriculum 2000 rules and was introduced for the Curriculum 2000 A-levels in 2003.

Inquiries and sackings notwithstanding, the pass rate rose again in 2003, increasing fears that the system is moving rapidly to a 100% pass rate. Moreover, over a fifth of candidates now achieve the highest grade.

The following chart shows the rise in pass rates over the past twelve years:



The following chart shows the rise in the percentage of candidates achieving A grade passes:



Responses to rising pass rates

There are plenty who cheer this rise in pass rates. The responsible Minister, David Milliband, said of the 2003 results that:

“Today is the day we should be celebrating, not falling for the British disease of knocking success.”

The NUT responded in a similar vein:

“Our students and teachers are to be congratulated for their hard work which has led to these outstanding results.”

But others affected directly by the calibre of students emerging from schools and by the difficulties that grade inflation poses have a different view. The two groups most directly affected are employers and universities.

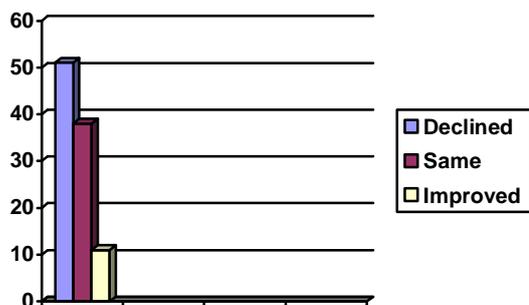
The employer response has been consistent and clear. Following the 2003 results, the Institute of Directors commented that:

“We continue to believe that yet another record breaking year for A-level passes is symptomatic of endemic and rampant grade inflation. Once again we must ask ourselves what do we want from A levels since it is clear that they are becoming increasingly meaningless. They no longer seem to be testing students.”

Universities have had a double ration of problems. Not only are they faced with apparently falling standards of entrants – who sometimes even require remedial attention before the traditional syllabus can begin – but they are also faced with a barrage of applicants with identical and impressive A-level results. Differentiating between candidates has become a virtually impossible task.

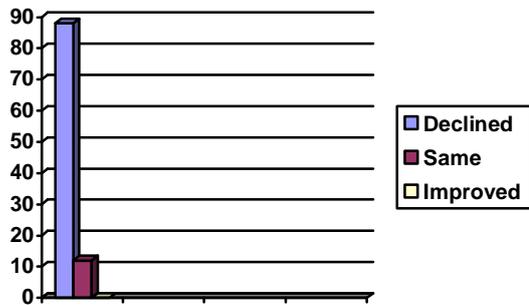
The Bow Group has conducted an exclusive survey of 100 academics teaching undergraduates at leading² UK universities to get their view of the calibre of candidates and the exams they have sat before coming to university. The results show the A-level’s spectacular decline in credibility.

49 per cent of academics surveyed by the Bow Group said that academic standards amongst university entrants had declined over the past ten years. Only 11 per cent thought that they had improved, notwithstanding Government protestations to the contrary. 40 per cent thought that standards had stayed about the same.



² All universities surveyed are members of the “Russell Group”.

On the specific question of A-level standards, the results were even more conclusive. Nearly 90% of the surveyed academics stated that the value of an A grade pass at A-level had declined over the past ten years. Not one thought that the value had risen; 12 per cent thought that it had stayed about the same.



It is these concerns that have led directly to the reintroduction of entrance examinations for popular courses at leading universities. Oxford, Cambridge and UCL have introduced a special examination for aspiring medical and law students. Oxford has introduced similar exams for history and Cambridge for languages. This represents the reversal of the policy of abolishing such exams just a few years earlier – a step that was widely welcomed as removing a block on pupils from underfunded state schools with no history of teaching to an Oxbridge entrance exam. It is an ironic and lamentable consequence of the dumbing down of A-level standards that such exams are now having to be reintroduced.

CHAPTER 2

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Labour

The Labour Government's response to the crisis in A-level standards was to assign responsibility for sorting it out to the former chief schools inspector, Mike Tomlinson. His first task following the debacle of the 2002 examination results was to certify the soundness of the 2003 results, which he duly did.

His report giving the 2003 results his blessing also contained a number of short term steps to endeavour to make the examination system more robust. These included greater professionalisation of the examination process and the formation of a subsidiary body to oversee exam conduct and modernisation.

These are worthy steps, but fall woefully short of what is needed to deal with the structural tendency of the current examination system to lower standards. The mere formation of a new bureaucracy within the QCA – the National Assessment Authority – to oversee standards merely replicates the current system where a semi-accountable bureaucracy is responsible primarily to political masters for exam results and standards. The QCA, and its sub-agencies, will inevitably remain the target of press and government scrutiny and pressure for their handling of the A-level.

Having completed this task, Tomlinson was then asked to head a committee looking into ways of reforming the 14-19 examination system to ensure that higher standards are delivered. The Interim Report of the committee, published in February 2004, set out a plan for a radical overhaul of the examination system.

The Report proposes a Diploma which will extend over the entirety of the 14-19 age range at school, and operating at a number of levels: Entry, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced. The proposals owe much to the widely-praised baccalaureate system (in both its French and International incarnations – see below in relation to the latter). It purports to incorporate (like the baccalaureate) elements outside the purely academic, such as “an extended project or personal challenge”, participation in “wider activities based on personal interest”, “contribution to the community as active citizens” and “experience of employment”. It also purports to integrate fully the vocational and academic strands into a single structure.

This is undoubtedly an ambitious scheme which seeks to draw on many of the (often conflicting) strands of thought on what a 14-19 qualification should look like.

This is the scheme’s first weakness: it seeks to be all things to all men. It purports to provide more academic rigour at the same time as equalising the status of the academic and non-academic. It purports to promote a qualification that will be more highly valued at the same time as bringing all pupils, no matter what their level of capability, within the same diploma structure.

***The new scheme
seeks to be all
things to all men...***

Furthermore, it seems likely to involve further considerable upheaval in schools. The past twenty years have seen a string of attempts to reconfigure the examination system – most recently the remoulding of the old A-level into AS and A2 components. Tomlinson acknowledges that while the new system will in some areas be able to draw on the old, in other areas whole new curricula and arrangements will have to be put in place. This counts strongly against his proposal.

Most importantly, though, the proposal fails to address the real reasons for the systemic failure in the examinations structure. A new quasi-universal, government-sponsored exam is just as likely to be subject to the same pressures to lower standards as the existing A-level. There is nothing in the proposals which gives any worthwhile guarantee of standards that does not already exist. Given that it was a controversy over standards which led to the initiation of his first inquiry, it is disappointing indeed that his second seems to have failed to address the issue properly.

Conservative Party

The Conservatives have rather ended up sitting on the fence on the issue of exam standards – not wishing to decry the achievement of a swathe of first time voters, but also concerned with the maintenance of traditional standards.

This may explain the Party’s rather feeble response to the failures of the A-level system. Their primary policy proposal has involved calling for the QCA to be made “fully independent”.

This is wholly misguided. It involves the abnegation of responsibility by politicians for an issue of huge importance to voters. It cements responsibility for examinations within a bureaucracy that would be – if anything – even less accountable following the proposed change. It does nothing to resolve the structural problems which lead to grade inflation, assuming instead that it is simply a question of better bureaucratic management of the process.

Other suggestions

A number of other proposals have been made to stem the decline in standards.

First amongst these is the introduction of an A* grade at A-level to mark out the very best candidates. This follows a similar development at GCSE level. While it may be a short-term solution, it does no more than devalue A-grades. Already, at GCSE, a string of A-grades is seen as second best; the same process is inevitable at A-level. Moreover, it is no more than a sticking plaster solution. If the process of levelling down continues apace, the time will come when even an A* grade ceases to differentiate candidates.

The Government has introduced a variant on this in the “Advanced Extension Awards”, which are intended as a supplement to A-levels to stretch the top 10 per cent of the cohort. Although this is a better system than the nonsensical A* grade, it seems to have failed to catch on. Only a few thousand candidates have been entered for it, and a Bow Group survey of university admissions departments revealed low levels of enthusiasm for the qualification.

Another proposal is the creation of a single examination board in England and Wales. Superficially, this seems sensible. One of the most oft-voiced criticisms of the existing multi-board system is that it encourages a “race to the bottom”, with schools selecting the easiest paper available from the various examination boards in order to improve their results. At A-level, studies have shown that pass rates for a single paper can vary by up to 7.7 percentage points between examination boards.³

However, the creation of a single examination board would create as many problems as it solves. It would leave in the hands of one single body the day to day (as opposed to supervisory) responsibility for keeping up standards. Moreover, given the well-publicised failures of various examination boards, creating a super-board in charge of all exams seems likely to exacerbate

The creation of a single exam board would create as many problems as it solves...

³ It is well known that pass rates vary substantially between the different examination boards. A study of GCSE English results in 2001, for example, found the following pass rates: Welsh Joint Education Committee 56.4%; AQA 57.1%; Edexcel 60.5%; OCR 67.3%; Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment 67.3%.

rather than clear up the administrative problems. Finally, the example of Scotland shows that a single examination board is no guarantee of the maintenance of standards. The annual debate on falling standards (recently coupled with the sort of overhaul of the examination system currently being envisaged by Labour) is equally fraught north of the border and the complaints of employers and universities are equally forthright.

Most importantly, the creation of a single examination board in England & Wales would be a thoroughly retrograde step in the light of the choice agenda around which a political consensus appears to be emerging. Both Labour and Conservatives seem now to be united in their belief that choice and control should be central to the provision of education and other public services. Parents should have more control over the school which their children attend; schools should have more control over how they are run.

Of course, as noted above, it is argued that offering a choice of examination board leads to nothing more than the “race to the bottom”. This is mistaken. Choice contains the makings of the solution to the structural problem afflicting examination standards in the UK, as the next chapter explains.

CHAPTER 3

A CHOICE SOLUTION

The International Baccalaureate

One of the most striking side effects of the decline of A-level standards has been the parallel rise of the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the UK. Virtually unheard of outside specialist international schools for the children of diplomats a few years ago, it is now increasingly the qualification of choice for universities and is offered by more and more schools.

The IB is administered by the independently-run International Baccalaureate Organisation based in Geneva. Its qualifications are offered in schools across the world. Students for its diploma programme must study a broad range of subjects as well as undertaking philosophical study and community work. Their subjects (in the UK) must include English, a second language, mathematics, a science and a humanities subject. In addition, students must undertake 60 hours of community work.

The rise of the IB epitomises the effectiveness of choice in education provision. In precise parallel with the decline in A-level standards, schools have shifted to an alternative qualification that offers, in their eyes, a better deal for their students.

It represents quite the opposite phenomenon to the alleged “race to the bottom” mentioned above: it is a gradual move to the top – to a more rigorous and more broadly based qualification.

Moreover, the nature of the IB provides the sort of structural guarantee of standards that the A-level lacks. The political pressures on the A-level – no matter how independent the quango regulating it may be – arise from its

quasi-universal nature. The fact that almost every state school in the country uses the A-level makes it inevitable that it will be a political plaything for governments determined to display rising pass rates as evidence of education policy success.

The independence of the IBO is, of course a crucial factor in the maintenance of standards. So is the fact that it is a cross-border qualification. But most important is the fact that its very appeal relies on the rigour of its standards. Schools have chosen it precisely because it represents a more impressive and worthwhile qualification. If that advantage is eroded, schools will simply leave the programme. This is a structural guarantee of standards.

Universities have been amongst the first to recognise this. Admissions tutors are inevitably going to be impressed by prospective students who hold skills across a wide range of subjects as well as the capacity to think at a philosophical level about what they are doing and some real life experience from their community work.

Indeed, it now appears that admissions tutors actively prefer students who hold the IB as opposed to A-levels. In a survey of admissions tutors conducted by the IBO, 57 per cent said that they believed that IB students were better able to cope with their degrees than A-level students. Only 3 per cent said that A-level students had the advantage.

This is a striking indictment of A-levels. And given the nature of the schools who make up the IB roll call, it shows how badly the A-level system is failing the majority of school students in England and Wales – those at bog standard comprehensives.

Notwithstanding its broadening popularity, a large majority of IB schools in the UK are independent or selective schools. Of the 58 schools currently in the programme, 27 are independent. Another five are selective. Nine more are further education colleges. Four are other specialist schools (e.g. international schools). Only 13 – 22% of them – are ordinary non-selective state schools (and that number includes state-financed city technology colleges, specialist language schools, etc).

Pupils from these schools are gaining a crucial edge over pupils from ordinary state schools up and down the country who are forced to go through the devalued A-level system. This is highly unfair.

A wider range of choice

But simply adopting the IB universally or – worse still – adopting a nationalised equivalent as seems to be proposed by the latest Tomlinson report – is not sufficient to provide the range of choice that will offer a structural guarantee of standards.

The best guarantee of high standards would be to encourage a range of examination providers to market their offerings. Already, as noted above,

there is a choice of examination boards in England and Wales. However, the choice between these is a false one, since schools and students gain no credit for selecting the more difficult examination.

This is a missed opportunity. Examination boards should be encouraged to differentiate their offerings, with some offering a “premium” product, with schools wishing to stretch their pupils taking these on and the students getting appropriate credit when applying for jobs or universities. Others might offer a more practically-based course and examination, with more hands-on work and less theory. The Edexcel A-level would be a different beast to the OCR A-level, and would be marketed as such.

Exam boards should be encouraged to differentiate their offerings...

The need to maintain these reputations and attract schools and students to the exams would provide the structural guarantee of standards which is lacking in the current universalised system.

A recipe for confusion?

The one merit of a universalised system, of course, is simplicity. In part this is a false simplicity, since the veneer of universal standards, as we have seen, hides the varying standards on offer underneath.

Moreover, there is no evidence that universities or employers would be unable to cope with a number of differentiated examination standards. Universities already welcome applicants with a huge range of international qualifications and major employers are similarly aware.

Indeed, universities themselves provide the perfect example of a successful differentiated system. No employer (and no student) believes, for example, that a first class degree from Luton University is worth the same amount as a first class degree from Oxford University, even though the name is the same. Here, the nonsensical political fiction that all degrees are the same has been replaced with a universal recognition that some are better than others.

The pecking order is well known but subtle. Some universities are well known for excellence in some subjects and not in others. Some (often newer universities) are known for producing graduates with excellent practical or business skills. And there is considerable mobility within the rankings, with universities set up in the 1960s now rated as some of the most impressive in the UK.

The same should be true of school qualifications.

Of course, if examination providers felt able to launch new qualifications, they should feel free to do so. The Scottish Qualifications Authority, moreover, should be encouraged to market its Highers to English schools on the same

basis. Providers from the US should be encouraged to enter the market. Universities may choose to get together to create an examination that suits their needs⁴. But crucially, in all cases, the government should stay out of the process. It should not seek to universalise qualifications, or to promote one at the expense of others. Schools should be offered a wide range of qualifications for their students and should be encouraged to select the most appropriate.

League tables

Others may complain that a multiplicity of examination boards will make it impossible to produce meaningful league tables of schools. It is true that universal league tables will not longer be meaningful if, say, the Edexcel A-level is a substantially different qualification to, say, the OCR A-level.

However, the differentiation of A-levels could bring about the more intelligent appraisal of examination result (and of schools) for which many have called for years. The simplistic ranking of schools according to their A-level points, without regard to their social circumstances or other features of the school, has always been an unsatisfactory exercise. This is not, of course, to say that, the information is without use or should not be published. It remains essential that parents have access to the fullest information on the standards in local schools. But the grade information is just part of a broader picture of the school which parents and others need to appreciate.

Where A-levels are differentiated, it becomes necessary to look behind the bald figures to see what they really say about the school. Some schools may decide that it is appropriate for their students to sit non-premium exams; their results may be commensurately higher (and the school may choose to “market” itself to parents on this point). At another local school, they may have chosen to put their students through more challenging exams; their pass statistics may not be as good as they might otherwise have been, but their pupils are gaining a more respected qualification. This more subtle appraisal of the standards in a given school will require the taking into account of other factors which show the real achievements of a school, not least the level of university entrance – as well as its approach to other features of school life such as excellence in music, sport or industry links, which will give its pupils a more valuable experience.

School choice

This system will not work without proper school choice. It would be conspicuously unfair if by fluke of geography, local parents were forced to send their children to a local school which offered unsuitable exams for their children.

⁴ It would be in the universities’ interests (and more equitable) to recognise qualifications other than this exam for the purposes of entrance; however, such a qualification could easily be marketed on the basis that it was sufficiently rigorous that admissions tutors would regard it as a strong qualification.

The type of examinations offered should be another factor in the differentiation of schools that is now being encouraged by Labour and Conservatives alike. Some may choose a more practically based curriculum and a more practically based exam. Some may choose more academically rigorous exams. Some may, indeed, choose to market themselves on obtaining higher pass rates in “non-premium” exams.

The crucial feature is that parents must be offered the choice of the system most suitable for their children. And this means that they must be offered proper school choice.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION – CHOOSING THE BEST

One thing which unites all those who comment on each year's A-level scores – be they defenders of the statistics or critics – is that the annual fight about standards must end. This is correct. It degrades students' achievements, undermines teachers' morale, and leaves employers and the wider public uncertain of the value of the qualifications young people are nowadays obtaining.

This debate will not end, though, until the system undergoes a structural overhaul. The overhaul it needs is categorically not the imposition of a new, universalised, government-backed qualification for 16-19 year olds, as suggested by Tomlinson. This is a recipe only for further upheaval in schools after two and a half decades of semi-permanent revolution. Most importantly, such a system fails to deal with the real reason why standards seem to slip.

Only by dealing with the structural problem in the current system, by making sure that it is in the interests of those who set the exams to ensure that high standards are maintained year on year, will the debate on slipping standards be ended. Only by allowing examination boards and others to set the terms of their own examination, differentiated as they wish from the offerings of others, and free from political pressure or input, will this step be achieved.

Already, with the rise of the IB, we see the value that some students are gaining from taking a qualification that is judged to suit them well and which has the respect of universities and employers. The challenge now is to ensure that that opportunity is open to all students in England and Wales.