

# A-levels: not as golden as they once were

**Martin Allen**

Created to replace the Higher School Certificate in 1951, and with only 3 per cent of the cohort sitting them, A-levels continued to be elite or 'gold standard' qualifications, educationally narrow, with universities having a major influence over their syllabus content. Until 1953 A-levels were only graded as pass or fail, at which point a 'distinction' grade was introduced. In 1963, a quota scheme was established, where 10 per cent of candidates would receive an A grade, 15 per cent a B, 10 per cent a C, 15 per cent a D, 20 per cent an E, a further 20 per cent would receive an O Level pass, with the remainder failing altogether.

As with other parts of the school curriculum, reformers were able to secure new forms of assessment reflecting students' ability (referred to in educational jargon as 'assessment for learning') rather than how they compared with others. By the end of the 20th century, the exams had also become 'modulised' with an AS level representing the halfway point but also serving as a qualification in its own right. With staying-on rates continuing to increase, these changes encouraged more students to enrol. As a consequence, A-level became a mass qualification, approaching 800,000 subject entries, with results rising for twenty-five years in a row, and large increases in the number of top grades being awarded. In response, leading private schools threatened to switch to alternative qualifications like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Cambridge Pre U.

Michael Gove, wanting to restore A-level to its former glory, set out to make syllabuses more 'robust', ended modular courses, re-established traditional assessment methods and made significant changes to the content of subjects like English and the humanities, these being hotly opposed by many practitioners. But Gove also introduced a 'comparative outcomes' formula, where the distribution of grades was not allowed to deviate from those of previous years, effectively meaning 'capping' being reintroduced and creating a situation

where, by implication, improved results in one school or college had to be balanced by a decline elsewhere. The pandemic has temporarily ended this state of affairs as a result of the suspension of exams and the reliance on teacher/school-based assessment.

While the majority of students and teachers welcomed this (more than a few being aghast to hear Tory politicians like Nick Gibb reversing, if only temporarily, their opinions about teacher assessment), it has not so far generated any lasting positive changes. On the contrary, there have been concerns about 'grade inflation' and the undermining of public confidence. (Last summer 87.5 per cent of entries achieved a grade C or above, compared to 75.5 per cent in 2019, while 38.1 per cent of all entries achieved a grade A or above, compared to 25.2 per cent in 2019).

Because qualifications like A-level have become 'credentials' - wanted primarily for their 'exchange' value; what they can 'buy' rather than their intrinsic qualities or 'use' value, then whatever the form of assessment, it will always be 'high stakes'. *The Guardian* (12/03/21) reported that headteachers fear the increasingly aggressive lobbying by parents 'with pointy elbows and lawyer friends' to boost their children's grades and, as a result, widening the attainment gap still further.

So ironically, external exams are now considered by many to have strong advantages. The fact that assessment criteria and marks schemes are publicly available (including for the 'applications, analysis and evaluation' required for higher grades) encourages students to accept that success or failure is essentially the result of their own efforts, in other words they perform an important legitimisation function!

Because schools and sixth form colleges have become 'exam factories', A-level teachers, many of whom will have 'performance related' pay linked to

results of their students and potentially facing disciplinary action if they do not follow Ofsted templates and teach in particular ways, have little choice but to slavishly follow examination specifications, 'teaching to test' and subjecting students to hours practicing past papers, so that they learn only what is necessary to jump through the various hoops. Compared to earlier times, when teachers might have looked forward to an afternoon with a small group of motivated sixth formers, classes have got much larger, with the amount of marking and preparation reaching new heights.

A-level qualifications are also 'high stakes' for students, effectively being the only route to a place at an established university and, as opportunities decline, a more advantageous position in the labour market. It goes without saying that teachers want their charges to do as well as possible! As a consequence, the situation is very different to SATs, the meaningless tests in the lower years of schooling, designed primarily to produce data on school performance, and where it was possible to build support amongst practitioners for union boycotts.

This does not mean that we should not continue to be creative and innovative in the classroom - many will continue to search for the space to be able to do this. But an effective challenge to A-levels must be part of a wider programme of curriculum changes (and for the reform of university admissions and routes into employment). We must continue to call for new qualification structures designed to increase the status of vocational learning, but we also need to critique the very notion of 'academic' education itself.

Under New Labour's *Curriculum 2000* proposals, for example, the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) were repackaged as Vocational and then Applied A-levels, incorporated the assessment requirements of academic qualifications, but, as a consequence, alienated many of the students they were originally designed to attract. Even then, Tony Blair, fearing loss of support from middle class parents, passed up the opportunity to integrate vocational and academic learning still further by rejecting the Tomlinson proposals for an overarching certificate, that his own government had commissioned.

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