



More assessment advice for new recruit

I largely agree with the comments made by Mike Shorten and Graham Soles on how to guide a new assessor (Problem Solver, Autumn 2006).

I especially agree with Mike's views around a mentoring system and the importance of peer observations. In addition to this, I think it is vital that once Ellie has completed her induction programme, the school adopts a "coaching model", with the purpose of enhancing her assessor skills even further through refinement and development with the support of an experienced teacher.

However, I feel that both Mike and Graham failed to recognise the importance of "external staff development" as a vehicle to assist Ellie. There is an array of providers designed to focus on specific provisions that can be tailored to Ellie's needs. In addition, the question failed to clearly identify the age range of the students

she will be teaching, and whether the students will be taking external exams.

On the theme of "how to assess", I would suggest that the school uses a range of active learning strategies that are widely available. These are simple and effective activities that Ellie could adapt to her own subject. Furthermore, they could be introduced into a lesson at any stage to assess her students – thus allowing for differentiation.

Lastly, once Ellie has been teaching for a couple of years she may also consider becoming an examiner, and hopefully the school would fully support her as this represents the best form of staff development available for a teacher.

Andrew Thompson
Subject leader in GCSE and A-level courses in law and business studies
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Head to head

George Turnbull

Strength in depth



Fifty years on, the A-level is robust and fit for purpose, says George Turnbull

As with most things in life, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. That holds true for qualifications, too. And with a quarter of a million candidates sitting A-levels each year, against the 2,000 taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the UK, there is little doubt as to what universities expect from each annual intake.

Introduced in the 1950s, the A-level has adapted to modern demands in terms of subjects offered and "state-of-the-art" procedures for best assessment practice. No longer is it a first-past-the-post exam with fixed numbers failing regardless of their ability. Since the mid-1980s, grades have been awarded purely on standards of achievement rather than fixed quotas, hence the greater proportions of youngsters gaining grades as levels of performance improve. It would have been easy to retain the quotas of failures each year – but grossly unfair to those seeking an accurate measure of educational ability.

What our universities generally seek is depth of study, and without a doubt that is what is to be found in A-levels. Breadth, although admirable, comes second to depth – rightly or wrongly – although such an approach may suit some.

Breadth is what the IB offers. But its international pedigree means that it cannot peg its standards to any particular country. So in history, for example, the cry for greater depth and conceptual understanding of English history, often heard in the media from the likes of David Starkey, would go unheeded, as the IB is structured around world history, starting essentially with the 19th century.

But when it comes to qualifications and exams, one size certainly doesn't fit all. Some may take the alternative vocational exams available and some may take none at all.

Does it matter? Of course it does, in that everyone, at whatever age, should ideally be best prepared for that next

stage in life. Flexibility is therefore an extremely important asset encapsulated within the A-level system.

And whereas the IB is essentially designed as a course of study for 16-18-year-olds, the A-level is fit for anyone of any age at any time. Single subjects of choice may be taken as part of professional development or pleasure, with assured acceptance internationally, or they can be blended into a coherent group of subjects for a particular purpose.

"A-levels are suitable for anyone at any time – students can take a subject for pleasure, or several to support their career development."

But it is only a tiny minority of candidates who get the coveted straight As in three subjects at A-level – about 3 per cent. So of a class of 30 in the first year of secondary school, only one will go on to achieve that rare accolade. Even fewer achieve As in all 18 modules and the universities have access to that information too for selection purposes.

It's not so long ago that the media was full of stories of students being stretched to the limit of endurance when the new A-levels were introduced in 2000. School orchestras and theatre clubs had to close through pressure of work and the Duke of Edinburgh Awards Scheme was suffering too, or so it was claimed. Hype may have played its part but certainly A-level candidates were being stretched far more than their predecessors.

But the pressure is still on students to succeed, under the influence of league tables and competition for places and jobs. And more than 50 years after the A-level was introduced, it still provides universities and employers with reliable information on which to award places and make appointments – with confidence.

About the author

George Turnbull is former head of public affairs for the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance and the Joint Council for General Qualifications

Michael Spens

Learning to think



With its emphasis on the development of individual learning skills, the International Baccalaureate Diploma is a strong alternative to A-levels, says Michael Spens.

In September 2006, Fettes College introduced the International Baccalaureate Diploma, making Fettes the only Scottish independent school to offer it alongside A-levels. A quarter of students in the Lower Sixth are studying the diploma and the interest surrounding its introduction at Fettes has been immense.

At Fettes we pride ourselves on maximising the potential of each student by continually pioneering educational advancements, so the introduction of the IB Diploma has been a natural fit. We wanted to augment the current A-level curriculum with a system that offers breadth of knowledge and a strong preparation for university life. The A-level curriculum is excellent for those who want to specialise while the IB Diploma complements it by offering breadth of knowledge. The key to the Fettes system is that both options are given equal treatment and it is the best course for the individual that matters.

The IB Diploma comprises:

- Six main subjects over two years – three studied to higher level (equal to 240 teaching hours) and three at standard level (150 teaching hours).
- An extended essay – 4,000 words on a topic of the students' interest.
- An interdisciplinary course called "The Theory of Knowledge", exploring the nature of knowledge across disciplines including different cultural perspectives.
- Compulsory extra-curricular work in the "Creativity, Action, Service" programme. This builds citizenship, independence, responsibility and individuality. It is also designed to foster students' awareness and appreciation of life outside the academic arena.

The basics of teaching, interaction, enthusing students and encouraging learning hold true for both courses.

There is still a full curriculum that has to be accomplished, but with the IB Diploma teachers will move away from being lecturers and towards being facilitators promoting individual learning and independent thought.

With the diploma, students are required to think for themselves. The "Theory of Knowledge" opens different cultural perspectives on learning, whereas the extended essays allows them to research a subject completely of their own choosing. This means that teachers will naturally begin to facilitate and encourage independent learning and expression of an individual's opinions, not simply teach facts.

"Ucas suggests a full diploma score of 45 is equal to over 6 As at A-level, convincing many that it provides the depth needed for university courses."

The breadth of subject choice, the international appeal of IB Diploma (such as its ability to open the doors to UK and international universities) and recent Ucas comments on the value of the diploma are the three main reasons for Fettes' parents and pupils supporting it.

Press coverage has highlighted the strength of IB for university entrance, with Ucas suggesting that a full IB Diploma score of 45 is equivalent to over 6 A-levels at A grade, and has further convinced many that the IB is not only about breadth but also provides the depth and standards required for university courses.

Indeed, as several newspapers have commented since this announcement in July, the IB is providing the new gold standard: there has been no grade inflation. At Fettes, the IB Diploma augments our current A-level system, offering our students choice that suits them whatever their goals.

About the author

Michael Spens has been headmaster of Fettes College, Edinburgh, since 1998. His previous appointments include headmaster of Caldicott School (1993-1998)

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Queries on coursework quota

So we have heard that coursework is being taken out of maths! I am a retired teacher of design and technology but still moderate and mark scripts for AQA in D&T graphic products.

I do see the value of coursework and agree with comments of Mike Cresswell (Testing times, Autumn 2006) about the skills that students develop. I do, however, take issue with the number of GCSE subjects that now have this coursework element. If a student is now expected to take 10 or more subjects then I say the equivalent number of sets of coursework is too much.

It would be interesting to ask Mike Cresswell how many sets of coursework would be enough to for him to agree that students experienced enough of "proper research" in the final year of their studies for GCSE.

We hearing a lot today about the problems of plagiarism. If the pressure of too much coursework is there, then I suggest so will the temptation to cut corners.

When I moderated I found that I had to rely a good deal on the honesty and professionalism of teachers overseeing and marking their students' coursework.

Roy Heyworth BA (Open), AIEA,
Bognor Regis, West Sussex

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- B) Professional indemnity, limit of liability
- C) Professional insurance, loss of licence

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Competition time!

Win free professional indemnity cover for a year?

While examiners and awarding bodies may condemn the growing litigation culture, no one is seemingly immune from legal action. Recent issues faced by an awarding body over unmarked exam scripts, as reported in the *Times Online*, suggest that one awarding body is allegedly not ruling out legal action against an examiner who failed to fulfil marking duties.

The need for adequate protection has probably never been more appropriate. To protect the interests of members, the IEA has partnered with Endsleigh Business Insurance Services to offer