

Grades and favour

Congratulations on the launch of the Institute of Educational Assessors. I think it's very important to raise the status of examiners and markers and to provide the teaching profession with reliable information about the assessment process. There is so much misinformation published in the media and this has the effect of making us doubt ourselves at times.

I have been a teacher for over 30 years, have been an examiner, coursework moderator and senior moderator for English Literature at A-Level and for the last 18 years of my career a Vice Principal of a sixth form college. It was not until I acted as an observer at AQA's English A-Level award meetings both last year and this year that I fully realised how much care and professionalism goes into the setting of grade boundaries and the maintaining of standards year on year.

The meetings were held over two days in the presence of the Chair of Examiners, the Chief Examiner and the senior examiners for

the six units within the qualification. All were experienced teachers and examiners involved not only in marking for many years but also in setting papers and preparing detailed mark schemes for them.

I felt confident that at the end of the two days the awarding process had been conducted in the most professional and most transparent way possible. Like all teachers I still feel the need to challenge the exam board if the grades earned by my students are not in line with my predictions but I now feel much more confident in the way the system operates. I genuinely believe that if more teachers understood the scrupulous, fair and honest procedures that are followed in setting grade boundaries they would be much less deprecating about our examination system, which I think is still the best in the world.

Sue Williamson
Educational Consultant – External Quality

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Hooked on classics

As a head of English, my main concern since 2001 has been the way in which the AS-level has destroyed for my students, and I suspect many others, a broadly based foundation course in English literature.

My ex-students who went on to study English literature at university used to report back how much of their degree course literature they had already read or become acquainted with in the sixth form, largely thanks to the wide-ranging coursework reading done in Year 12. However, the last ex-student

who spoke in these terms graduated with a First from the University of Leicester in 2004, having been among the last to take the legacy A-Level syllabus and benefit from our broad brush Year 12 foundation year.

Why isn't the AS replaced with two modules along the AEA model – one unit of coursework drawing on the breadth of literature from Beowulf to the present day, followed by an externally examined paper for Unit 2? I would be interested to hear what your readers think.

Neil King
Head of English,
Hymers College

Paying the price

I understand that part of your role is to support the hard-pressed 'foot soldiers' of the examination and testing systems – the examiners and markers who actually do the marking, year in year out.

I'd be interested to hear what you can do to help me with my dilemma, which is about the cost to me of doing the job.

We all know the money isn't

good. But overall, it has always represented a reasonable return for most of us and has helped towards the cost of a decent summer holiday.

This year, things look a bit different from where I'm sitting. Working for one awarding body, I am told in March that I have to mark on-screen.

My problem is that I don't have any choice in the matter. If I want to mark, I have to do it this way. What's more, in order to mark I must have a reasonable spec PC at home and a broadband connection. A nominal fee of £15 is included for the latter – equivalent to one month's rental. I can't be alone in not having broadband – either by choice or because it is not available where I live. As for the PC, no contribution is available and the awarding body simply assumes I am ready to mark this way.

Compare this to traditional marking where the cost to me was a couple of red biros. Looks to me like good business for the exam board and bad business for the poor old examiner. Have any other readers had a similar experience?

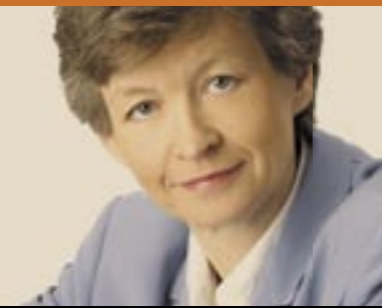
My own research shows that the evidence towards less challenging syllabuses and grade inflation, over the last 20 years, is overwhelming. Academics and employers require examinations that discriminate between the academically good, the very good and the brilliant. A-Levels no longer do

Name and address supplied

Head to head

Ruth Lea

Golden age of grades



We need to face up to falling standards and make exams more challenging, insists Ruth Lea

Every year there is a major dispute about A-Level standards and last year was no exception.

In the red corner, the educational establishment claims that, despite the inexorable rise in pass rates and rise in the proportion achieving the A grade, there is absolutely no evidence for grade inflation and easier exams. A-Level standards are just as good, if not better, than 10-20 years ago, it claims.

Meanwhile, in the blue corner, academics claim that they now have to teach material to first year undergraduates that used to be taught at schools under the A-Level syllabuses. Therefore, they claim, A-Level standards are in decline. They add that, with the rash of grade As, they can no longer discriminate between the academically good, the very good and the brilliant, thus making admission selection procedures more difficult.

Alongside the academics we have the employers' bodies, who believe that the rise in the A level pass rates hides some disturbing trends such as the switch from 'hard' subjects, including languages, maths and science, to 'soft' subjects such as media studies, which tend to be dismissed by employers.

Finally, there are those who try to explain the inexorable rise in pass rates by looking at other factors such as the rise of modularisation and the tendency for schools to only enter students who are almost sure to pass the exams, so their position in the league tables will impress all who pass by. In the middle of this mayhem are the students, who must be wondering why this acrimonious situation has arisen.

My own research shows that the evidence towards less challenging syllabuses and grade inflation, over the last 20 years, is overwhelming. Academics and employers require examinations that discriminate between the academically good, the very good and the brilliant. A-Levels no longer do

this. They are, quite simply, no longer the gold standard.

My hope now is that the futile arguments about standards that occur every August, would stop. I believe that there are three ways forward. The first is to "shore up" the current system with more difficult questions for some, the introduction of an A* grade and/or the availability to academics and prospective employers of every mark from every module of every A-Level. This appears to be the favoured route of the Department for Education and Skills for the time being. But it is a plastering over the cracks approach and it will not solve the fundamental problems with A-Levels.

"Academics and employers require exams that discriminate between the good, the very good and the brilliant."

The second approach is the route proposed by Sir Mike Tomlinson, which is to replace A-Levels with a leaving "diploma", graded at various levels, covering a range of academic, quasi-academic and vocational achievements. This route leads to obfuscation and confusion, while academics and employers need clarity and openness.

The third approach is to be completely open and honest about the need for academic examinations that can truly discriminate between students of different abilities. Exam boards could develop examinations that were as academically discriminatory as A-Levels were 20 years ago, but they would have to be renamed.

Finally, why can't this country develop and adequately fund an alternative route to develop those young people who are vocationally inclined? We need them more than ever.

About the author

Ruth Lea has been director of the Centre for Policy Studies, a leading think-tank, since 2004. Prior to this, she was the Head of the Policy Unit at the Institute of Directors. Her career highlights also include the roles of economics editor at ITN and chief UK economist at Lehman Brothers.

Helen Patrick

Get real on standards



Harking back to a golden age of educational standards misses the point, argues Helen Patrick

The annual August debate provides the opportunity to let off steam, as people have done for centuries, about how inferior educational standards are now compared to what they were in some past golden age. Often, however, it is a sterile debate that does not address the real issue.

In 2001, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority appointed a panel of independent, internationally recognised experts to review the quality assurance and quality control arrangements for GCE A-Level, to compare them with arrangements in other countries and to make recommendations on how they might be strengthened.

The panel's first conclusion was that there is no scientific way to determine in retrospect whether standards have been maintained.

The panel was not the first to point this out. The difficulties are well known, though you would hardly think so from some of the 'debate' about standards.

The contexts in which examinations operate – educational, social, economic, political, technological, and so on – all change over time, and examinations change accordingly. But the more they change, the harder it is to make valid comparisons, as numerous studies have shown. The 'educational establishment', as businesspeople are so keen to call us, is right to claim that there is no evidence for grade inflation because there is no cast-iron evidence either way.

The 'educational establishment' is on much shakier ground when its statements appear to suggest that A-Levels today are of the same standard as A-Levels in 1951. There are procedures for maintaining standards from year to year and the independent panel concluded that these work as well as could be expected. However, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the awarding bodies could be more

up front about the difficulty of making meaningful comparisons over such an extended period of time.

I think we need to get real about assertions that standards have risen or fallen. All we can say with certainty is that they are different.

The real issue is whether A-Levels and other examinations are fit for purpose. Since A-Levels were introduced, the opportunity to gain qualifications has increased greatly, as has the level of qualification required for most jobs. The debate now should be about whether the system has responded appropriately or whether there might be better ways of meeting the needs of students, employers and higher education.

In 1951 only about 7% of the cohort took A-Levels. Today, the figure is around 40%. Should A-Levels cater for such a wide range of students or should they focus on distinguishing between the 3% to 4% who gain three or more A grades? Should an A-Level provide a broad mathematical education, or should it concentrate on the skills that university mathematics departments need? What is the value in offering A-levels in subjects such as sociology, psychology and economics which used to be the preserve of universities?

QCA's panel pointed out that encouraging more students to pursue university study and improving student performance are entirely separate goals. Both are at odds with the view that high A-Level grades must be limited to a very small proportion of candidates.

The August standards debate does have one positive feature – it puts educational assessment and qualifications high on the national agenda. This year we should take the opportunity to debate what we want public examinations to do and how best they can achieve our purposes.

About the author:

Helen Patrick has worked as a teacher and as an educational researcher. In her last post she was a senior research consultant at the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (now Cambridge Assessment). She is now combining early retirement with consultancy. For more information on the QCA panel: www.internationalpanel.org.uk