



POLICY CHALLENGE

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Alarm
over
A-Level

Fred Naylor

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This paper is based on a submission by the Education Study Group of the Centre for Policy Studies to the A-level Review Committee chaired by Dr Gordon Higginson.

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INTRODUCTION

VERY MANY PEOPLE CONCERNED WITH EDUCATION LOOK WITH alarm at the threat to educational standards at A-level. New teaching practices and the GCSE examination alike undermine A-level standards. This is not to say that the Study Group opposes improvements in the content of examinations, or additions to the number of subjects taken by a pupil at the age of 18+. A broadening of the curriculum is, on the whole, to be welcomed. Lowering the standard of examinations is another matter altogether.

THE EGALITARIAN THREAT

Historical Background

Examinations, especially those designed for the more able pupils, have always disturbed egalitarians. They attack grammar schools; they attack O-levels for the same reasons. Although their ideal of a single, uniform examination to be taken by all pupils at the age of 16 has yet to be realised, the GCSE is hailed as an important step along the way. O-level is already on the point of elimination.

If the O-level was the first target of the 'Equality Merchants'*, the A-level is certainly not escaping their fire now. It is attacked as just as elitist and obnoxious. All the more reason to applaud the work of the School's Council's Second Sixth Form Working Party, chaired by Dr Briault from 1968 to 1973, which thwarted attempts to set up a Certificate of Extended Education (CEE) to be awarded after a two-year course beyond CSE. There were two intentions behind this apparently innocuous proposal. The first was to extend the range of abilities examined at 18+ by creating a new examination alongside the A-level, in the same way that the CSE was subsequently set up alongside the O-level in 1965. The next aim was to unify CEE and the A-level, just as the CSE and O-level has now been unified.

Of course, an increase in the numbers 'passing' a unified 18+ examination would ipso facto increase the numbers of 'qualified' leavers; and this would be most attractive to those who argue for the expansion of universities and are frustrated by the failure of the school system to meet the absurdly over-optimistic forecasts of Robbins and (later) of the Department of Education and Science in 1970.

Although Dr Briault got the better of the 'Equality Merchants', their success over the 16+ examinations will have encouraged them to return to the field.

The Present Threat

The renewed opening of the battle is signalled by the setting-up of the A-level Review Committee.

Witness the title of the talk given by Mr Peter Dines, Chief Officer of the Secondary Examinations Council, at the conference arranged by the National Council for Educational Standards in November 1986, 'The threat to A-levels from the new GCSE' - a title which indeed identified one of the main threats, the new GCSE itself. Mr Dines promised that the SEC would do its best to maintain the standards of A-level. But how can this be achieved unless those who wish to maintain standards acknowledge the danger areas, and consult on what steps must be taken to parry the attacks?

The threat from the GCSE

Standards at 16+ are being threatened with erosion from at least four different directions. These are:-

(i) Coursework

Far too much coursework is permitted in the GCSE. In English pupils can get a 100% result by this means. But in other subjects they are encouraged to do coursework too. Sometimes this is in the form of projects. These can be useful. But a pupil can easily spend too much of his time on them, at the cost of acquisition of solid knowledge and understanding. For projects and other work done outside school almost always reflect help and advice given by parents and friends, thus tending to offer too rosy a view of the pupil's own abilities. Assessment can therefore be warped - and unduly high marks given. Unfortunately, Examination Boards now vie with each other to offer ever more assessment of such coursework at A-level. The easy option is taking hold.

(ii) Examination Procedures

Most people now realise that O-level and CSE examinations are norm-referenced - that is, marks are awarded not on the basis of merit, but on a system of rank order. Originally it was intended that they should be confined to the top 60% of the ability range; but schools took advantage of norm-referencing by entering pupils of lesser ability for whom the examination was

never intended. Thus standards were automatically lowered.

The switch to criterion-referencing in the GCSE, however, will cause great problems and could lower standards even further. The belief that pupils in the bottom 40% of the ability range are bound to benefit from such a switch is widely-held, but quite false. Everything, of course, depends on the criteria set for each grade. For example, should the new GCSE Grade F be set at the level of CSE Grade 4 as it was when the examination was created in 1965, or at the level it will have become in 1987? The temptation to use the GCSE to give an artificial boost to success rates will be great, and must be resisted at all costs.

(iii) Movement towards a common examination

The GCSE establishes common papers for pupils of widely differing abilities. And in principle there is no reason why common papers should not be set for all 16-year-olds, provided that the questions are presented in order of difficulty so that candidates are able to find their own level without wasting time on unnecessarily easy ones. In practice this is seldom if ever possible; and able candidates do waste their time answering questions which are too easy for them. Levelling-down is the inevitable consequence. A single common examination at 16+ is so-called of the 'Equality Merchants', a goal they must not be allowed to attain.

(iv) Techniques versus understanding

Many people may argue that knowing how is a superior accomplishment to knowing that. But there is a real danger that the learning of facts will be relegated too low, and the teaching of critical techniques introduced too soon. This is to put it mildly.

The threat of lower university standards

The over-optimistic forecasts by Robbins of the numbers who would become qualified for higher education were repeated by the DES in 1970. Plans for the expansion of universities were based on projections contained in the DES 'Education Planning Paper No. 2: Student Numbers in Higher Education in England and Wales' (1970); but whereas it was forecast that the number of school-leavers with two or more A-levels in 1981 would be 171,000, the actual number was only 104,490: a massive shortfall.

The increase in the percentage of school-leavers with such A-levels between 1971 (a peak year) and 1985 was only 6%, compared with an increase of 100% in the six years 1962-1968. Furthermore, nearly all of the increase can be attributed to girls catching up with boys. Since girls have now closed the gap - which used to be a very large one - current forecasts of future expansion are likely, once again, to be far too high.

Given the modest growth in qualified school-leavers, both Government and universities will be greatly tempted to increase their numbers by the simple expedient of

making it easier for them to qualify. Clamour against A-level has already been raised by several distinguished educationalists. For example, Professor Geoffrey Howson, Director of the Centre for Mathematics Education at Southampton University, suggested in his inaugural lecture, and again in an article in the 'Times Educational Supplement' (6 March 1987) that more limited A-levels, easier and with a smaller syllabus, could lead to more students gaining greater mathematical competence.

Possibly mathematics is a special case - in that the A-level pass is more difficult than in most other subjects. But this has never been officially recognised; and the idea of 'equality of reward' between subjects has, for better or worse, been always embedded in the A-level examination. So, unless a special case can be made out, the pleas of the Professor are likely to be the first of a series of demands to lower the standards of A-level, and increase the flow of students into a higher education for which they are dubiously qualified.

A possible reform of the 18+ examination system

If the A-level examination were to be replaced by a new one which allowed the average academic sixth-former to take five (instead of three) subjects to an equal level (3A ---> 5X) the target group of pupils would be unchanged. There would be no overall lowering of standards. The amount of time spent on each X would only

be three-fifths of that at present spent on each A-level. This would mean that the standard attained would be correspondingly lower. But on the other hand the two subjects which are dropped under the present system would be continued to the very much higher X-level under the new one. The author has described in 'Technical Schools: a tale of four countries' (CPS 1985) a number of methods of ensuring that a 5 X-level pattern of examinations at 18+ do not lead to extension of the existing honours degree courses.

Conclusions

The main threat to A-level comes from GCSE, as the Chief Officer of the Secondary Examinations Council implied. The same teachers who only a year ago were inveighing against the proposed GCSE because it would not provide a satisfactory base for the study of A-levels, are now with the establishment of GCSE arguing that the demands of the A-level be reduced. This is an argument hard to resist; but it confirms the belief that the battle for preserving the A-level should be fought on the battlefield of the GCSE.

How should the grade-related criteria for the GCSE be established? Here is an area of fierce controversy. If they are set too low, the Government's avowed aim of maintaining the rigorous standards of A-levels will fall by the wayside. The example set when O-level was

introduced to replace School Certificate is well worth following. The new pass standard at O-level was set at the old credit standard in School Certificate in recognition that standards had been falling over many years, and needed to be raised.

The doctrines of GCSE, which are in large measure egalitarian, must be prevented from infiltrating at A-level.

It is dangerous to debase examination standards, in the name of expanding higher education. Any temptation to do so must be firmly -- indeed passionately -- resisted.

* The term is borrowed from George Bernard Shaw (essay 'Equality' in 'Everybody's Political What's What?')

+ In 1972, seven years after the introduction of CSE, 36% of school-leavers had attempted at least one CSE. In 1973 (the first Rosla year) this figure had risen to 65%; and in 1984 it was 77%. It should be noted that the 23% who had not attempted a single CSE in 1984 includes a large number of able pupils whose attempts would be confined to O-levels.